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BLACK MASK



ALCOHOLICS CALAMITOUS

A CELLINI SMITH STORY
by ROBERT REEVES

DEAD MAN'S DIARY

A MIKE SHAYNE NOVELETTE
by BRETT HALLIDAY

JULIUS LONG AND OTHERS



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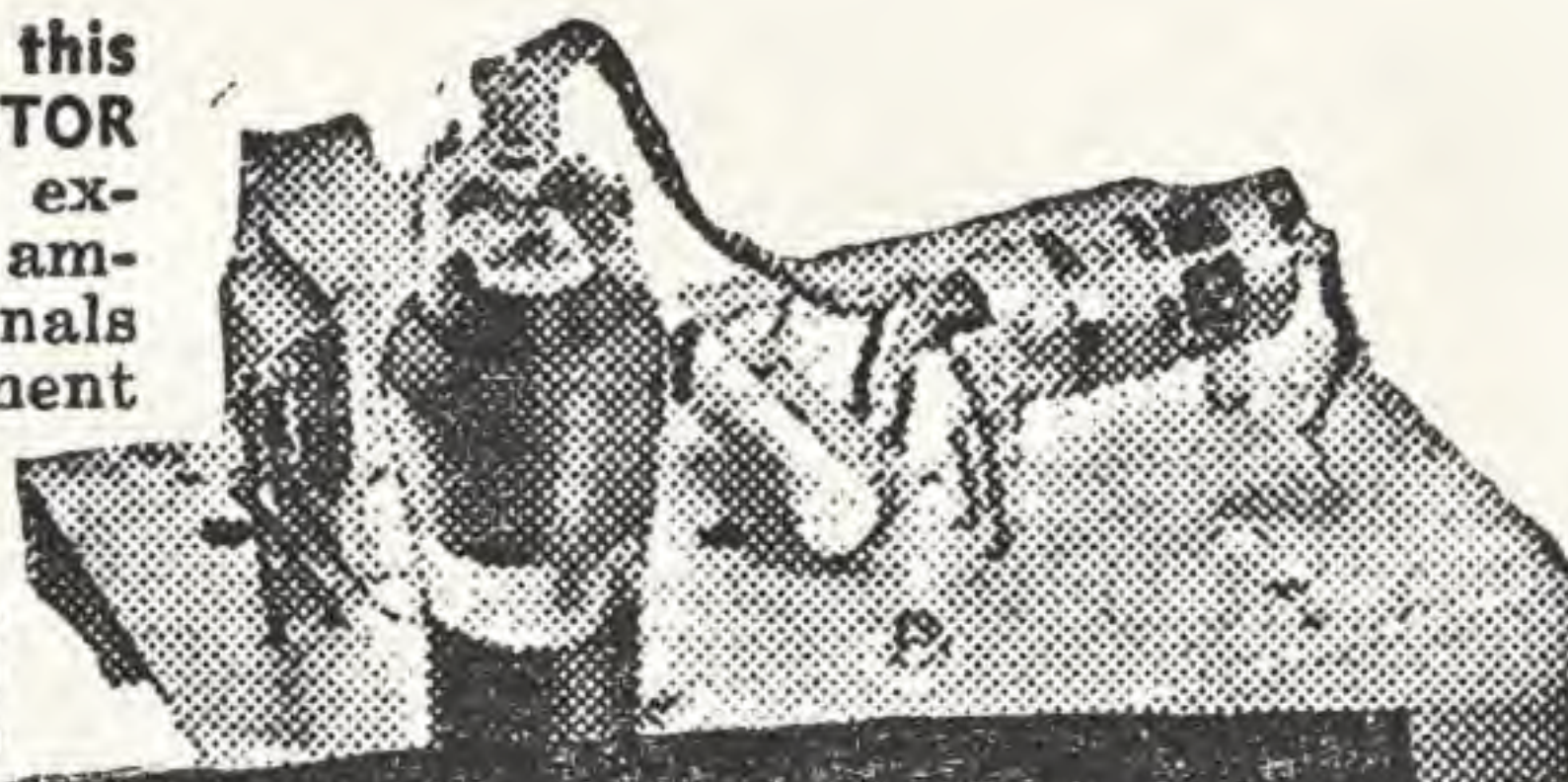
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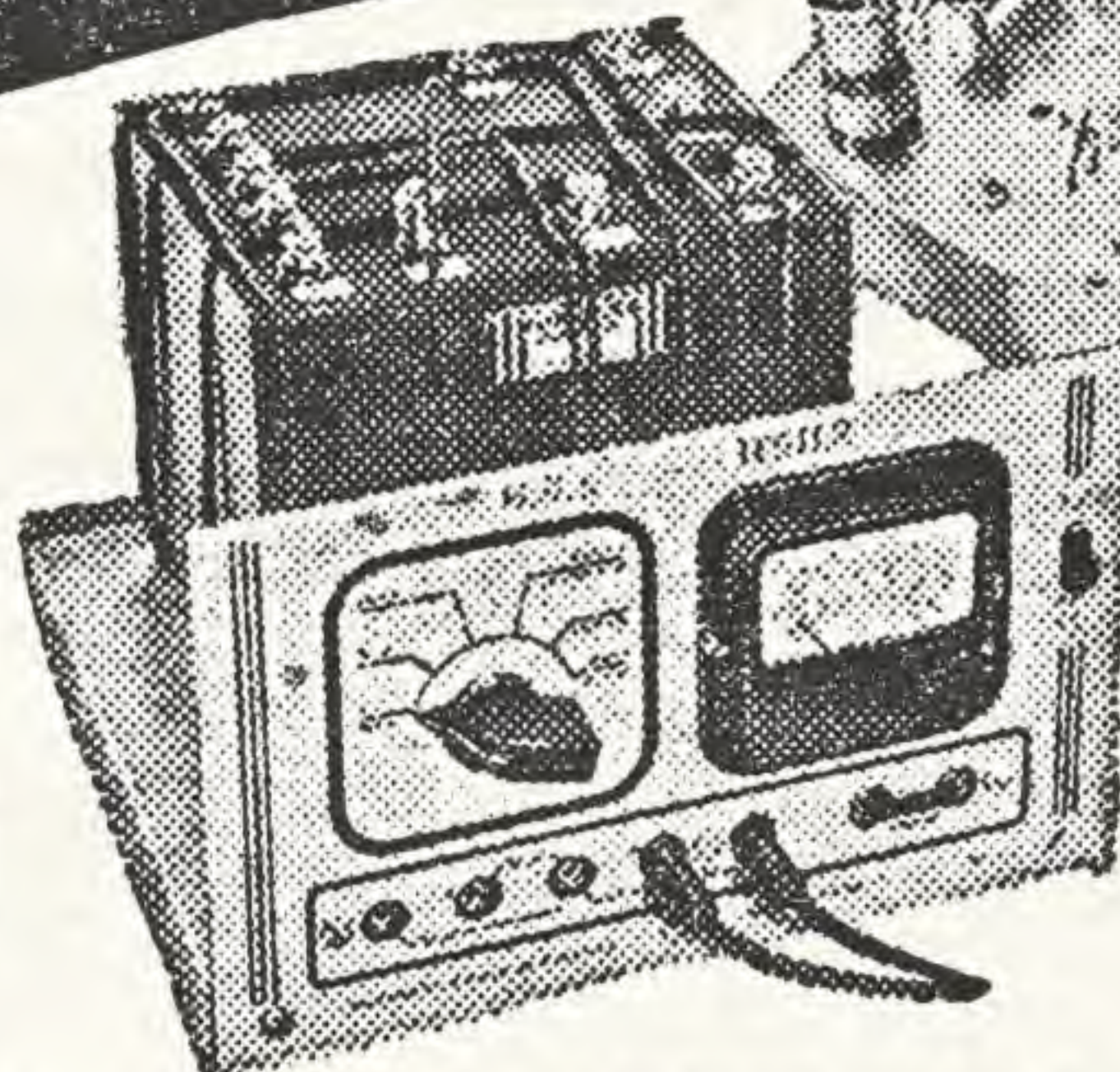
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HOW TO TRAIN
AT HOME AND
**Win Rich
Rewards
in Radio**

A black and white photograph of a dark, textured, crescent-shaped bag. It has a strap with a buckle and a small rectangular label on the front. The bag is shown against a light background.

BLACK MASK



VOL. XXVII, No. 2



September, 1945

DEAD MAN'S DIARY Brett Halliday 10

Jasper Groat was a tidy man with a tidy conscience, and his passion for neatness caused his murder. If he hadn't taken pains to write down all the harrowing details of his experiences on a life raft after the S.S. Okeechobee went down he might have been walking around today. But as Shayne explained: "When a man thinks he's going to die he tells all sorts of things he wouldn't dream of telling otherwise. Things that prove dangerous in print."

HEIR IN THE AIR Dale Clark 49

"Just a case of a guy playing ghoul and getting knocked for a goal," was the way Endicott, the manager of the swank San Alpa, put it. But O'Hanna, the overpriced flea-bag's house dick, knew better. That was too simple to explain the blood on the fake beard, the draft of Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, the bomb in Grandfather's car—not to mention a very stubborn corpse.

ALCOHOLICS CALAMITOUS Robert Reeves 62

"I tell you I'm a private dick!" yelled Cellini. But Mr. Howard of Howard's Alcoholic Cure merely nodded and typed the shamus a psychopathic inferior, along with the rest of the "booze-who" in his streamlined booby hatch. Which was quite a typing for it included the fabulous Mr. Sprigley, Ivy Collins who divided her time between the bottle and blackmail, and Henry Fields of the cut-throat Fields who wound up at the razor's edge, you might say.

OVER MY DEAD BOOTY Julius Long 80

Nobody really knew whether it was suicide, accident or that other thing when Ed Ditson fell twelve stories into a parked car, killing Sheila Brown. But when Corbett began applying his talents to the Midtown mess it was truly surprising the assortment of human insects that started crawling out from under their logs.

LIFTING THE NOVEMBER BLACK MASK 6

A partial preview of our plans for the next issue of this magazine.

CAN YOU STICK TO YOUR GUNS? **Julius Long 6**

Another Quiz Program for Firearms Fans.

Black-and-white illustrations by Peter Kuhlhoff

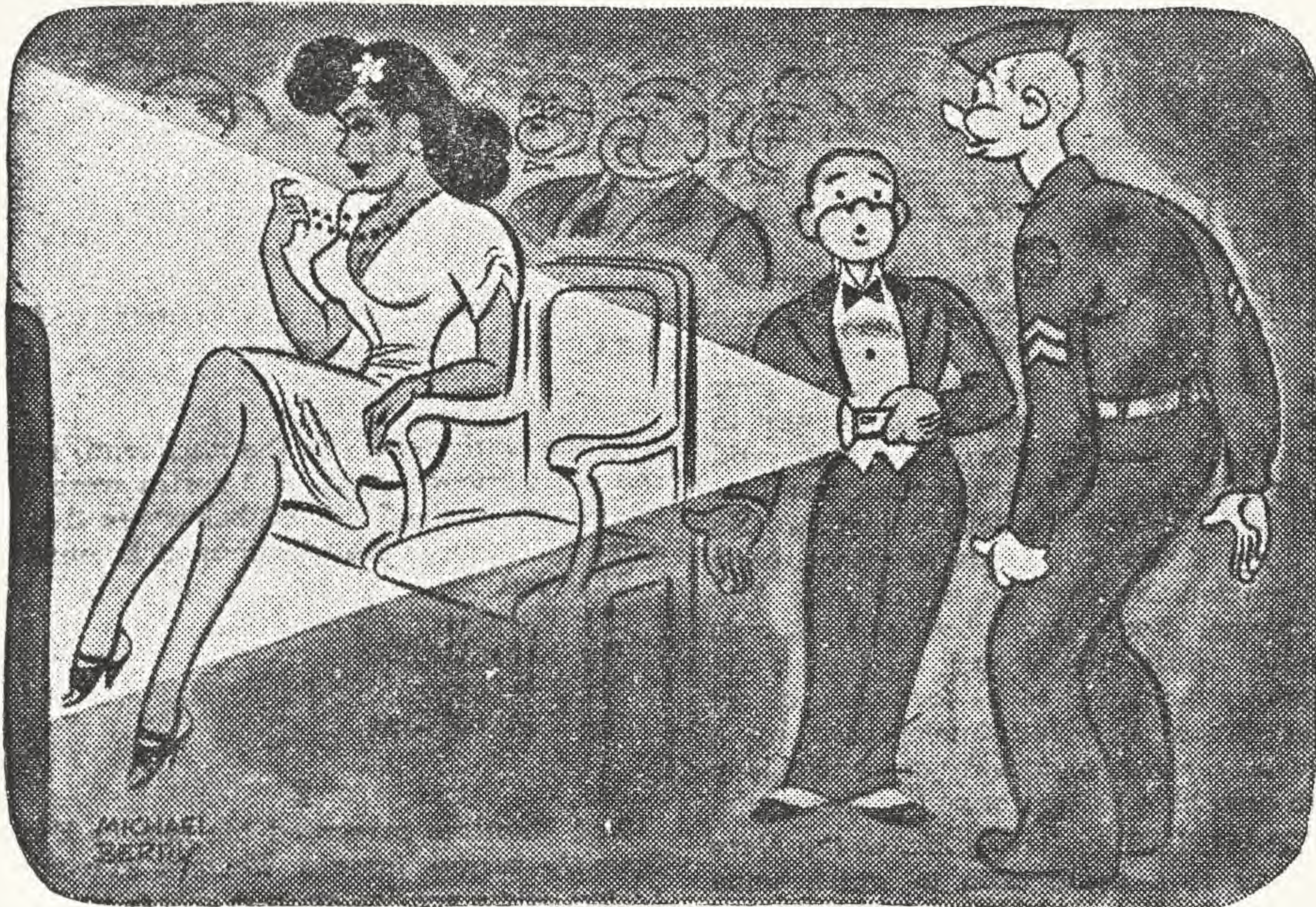
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has never before been printed in any publication**

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LIFTING THE NOVEMBER BLACK MASK



BITTERNESS and envy are base qualities—as are avarice and greed. You must learn to control these emotions, Joey, or someday they will dominate you.”

That was the fantastic brand of reverse-English triple-talk that Rex Sackler, the closest-fisted tightwad who ever squeezed a fee out of a murder case, was in the habit of spouting whenever his underpaid choreboy made any cracks about the Gibraltar-like state of his boss's financial structure. No wonder Joey threw the pious nonsense back where it started the first chance he got. And what a chance! For a guy who'd put his own grandmother on the Tokyo auction block if the yen exchange happened to be favorable to get taken for fifteen hundred bucks cash by a couple of clever con men was just what Joey needed to turn his gloomy horizon golden again.

D. L. CHAMPION, in *Money Makes the Mare Go*, takes us to a horse farm to watch some high-priced breeding, betting and bloodletting in our next. It's Champ, Sackler and Joey at their dickering best—with Inspector Woolley sitting on the sidelines as usual to clamp down on the killer after Rex serves him up on a silver platter.

And H. H. STINSON brings back those none-such L.A. newshawks, Ken O'Hara and Tony Ames—absent from our contents page far too long—in *Your Corpses Are Showing*.

Tony was on her way over to the jail to interview a gal who had married three sailors (they awarded her the Navy E for effort and a warrant for trigamy). when the case broke. It didn't wind up till a handy war souvenir shaped vaguely like a pineapple but infinitely more lethal was used for a purpose Army Ordnance had never intended.

Plus an exciting novelette by E. HOFFMANN PRICE—*A Date in Bagdad* (Calif. not Iraq), and shorts and features by other favorite top-flight crime-fictioneers.

This great November issue will be out on September 19th.

CAN YOU STICK to your GUNS?

Or Are You Stuck With Them?

By JULIUS LONG



Answers to the following questions and problems will be found on page 8.

1

In the sixth decade of the nineteenth century the most famous guns in America were called “Beecher's Bibles.” Listed below are five firearms. Which was the type thus nicknamed?

- The Colt '51.
- The Kentucky Rifle.
- The Sharps Rifle.
- The Derringer.
- The Gatling Gun.

2

Ned Buntline presented his famous Buntline Specials to five famous Western gun-slingers. Listed below are five gents of whose six-shooter prowess there can be no doubt. Can you name those who were recipients of the Buntline Specials?

- Buffalo Bill Cody.
- Billy the Kid.
- Neal Brown.
- Bat Masterson.
- Wyatt Earp.

3

Listed below are five famous gun-toters of the old West. Which boasted the most notches on the grip of his Colt Peacemaker?

- Wyatt Earp.
- Wild Bill Hickok.
- Bat Masterson.
- Billy the Kid.
- Bill Tilghman.

4

Which of the gun-toters of the old West listed in Question 3, above, were exponents of the art of gun-fanning, that is, tying down the trigger and firing the six-shooter with the left hand?

(Continued on page 8)



IF you're that man, here's something that will interest you.

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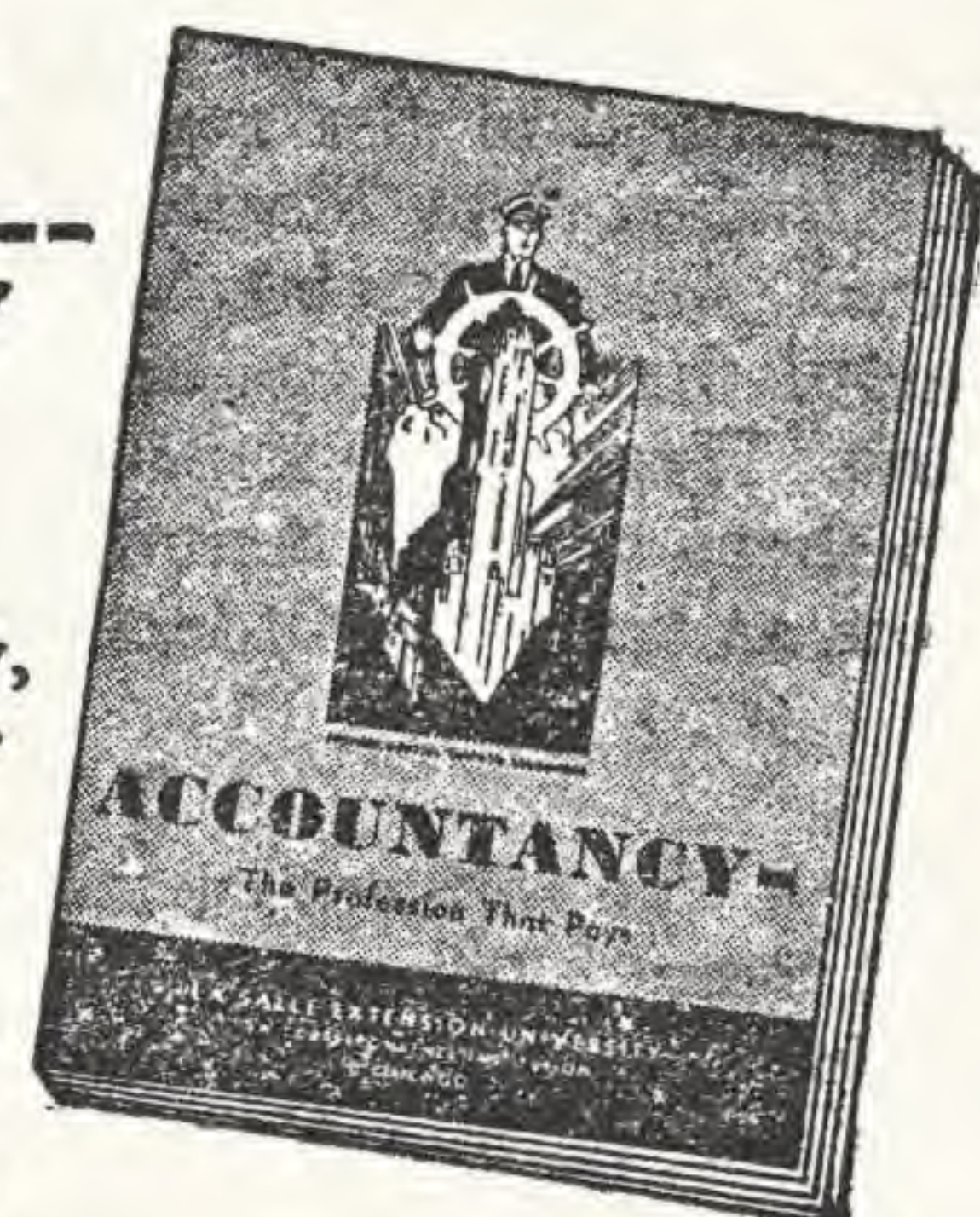
Name

Address

City

Position

Age



(Continued from page 6)

5

No bullet will rotate when fired from a smooth-bore gun unless the bullet itself, such as a Brenneke Slug, is rifled. RIGHT or WRONG?

6

The shooting ability of the old Western gun-slingers has been highly exaggerated—they would be duck-soup to a modern police officer scientifically trained under present methods. RIGHT or WRONG?

Answers to Preceding Questions

1

The Sharps Rifle. This gun, the first successful breechloading rifle, was shipped to John Brown in large quantities. The cost of the guns as well as freight to Kansas was paid for by disciples of Henry Ward Beecher, who was quoted as opining that there was more moral power in one Sharps Rifle than in one hundred Bibles. As the guns were also packed for shipping disguised as Bibles, they easily derived their name.

Anyone guessing the Colt deserves some credit, for John Brown used Colts, several of which are preserved in the Ohio State University Museum at Columbus, Ohio. But all parties putting their money on the Gatling Gun should run to cover, for Dr. Gatling didn't invent his "gat" until 1862.

2

The last three gents mentioned, Neal Brown, Bat Masterson and Wyatt Earp, as well as Charlie Bassett and Bill Tilghman, were presented with Buntline Specials by E. Z. C. Judson, who glorified these five famous Dodge City deputy-marshals under the nom de plume of Ned Buntline. Judson took the name, "Buntline," from a ship's rope, because he started writing as an author of sea stories. Later he discovered the greener pastures of the Western plains, made "Buffalo Bill" famous, though he never presented Cody with a Buntline Special. The Special was a .45 Colt with a barrel a foot long instead of the regulation seven and one-half inches. Bat Masterson and Bill Tilghman sawed their Specials down to regular size, fearful that the extra length would slow their draw. Wyatt Earp kept his Buntline as it was, and there were no complaints except from such idiots as tried to outdraw him.

3

None. No self-respecting gun-toter of the old West would have desecrated the walnut grip of his six-shooter by putting a notch thereon. Only the tenth-raters affected this vainglory. Perhaps the legend of the gun-notch has been perpetuated by Bat Masterson who, pestered

by a gun collector for his shootin' iron, went out to a hockshop, bought a Colt and carved twenty-two notches in the butt. "Did you actually kill a man for every notch?" asked the bug-eyed collector. "And I didn't count Indians," answered Bat, never batting an eye.

4

None. The gun-fanner soon learned the error of his ways if he lived long enough. Such shootin' was fancy but inaccurate. A "fanner" would fire his Colt so fast it would sound like a machine-gun, but he wasn't hitting anything at the time. The most famous gun-fanners are in the movies. They use blanks in Hollywood, but they could give these counterfeit characters live ammunition, for the way they fan their guns, they couldn't hurt anybody.

5

WRONG. A London gunsmith named Lancaster designed a smooth-bore gun with a slightly elliptical barrel rotating one turn to its length. The bullet rotated with the barrel, receiving the effect of rifling. Another gunsmith, Joseph Whitworth, designed a hexagonal barrel which also rotated one turn to its length. Both guns proved more accurate than the Enfield then in use, and according to Ellis Christian Lenz, (*Muzzle Flashes*, Standard Publications, Inc., Huntington, W. Va.) good Queen Victoria herself made a bull's-eye at 400 yards with the Whitworth gun. Were I a gambling man, I'd be willing to bet Mr. Lenz \$15.00, the price of his book, against 15c, the price of this magazine, that good Queen Victoria not only shot the rifle from a rest, but that it was sighted for her by the best marksman in V.R.'s army and navy.

6

WRONG. The "big league" Western gun-toter possessed an ability of which we are inclined to be skeptical because it is almost a lost art today. I say "almost" because Mr. Ed McGivern in modern times has proven by his own exploits that the lightning draw and fire can actually be achieved. We have in further corroboration of old-West gun prowess a sufficiency of documentary proof. We can also draw comparisons. To those skeptics who laugh at the idea of dead-shot accuracy without the use of sights, I ask: "Did Bill Tilden ever have any sights on his tennis rackets?" He did not. Yet he could take the chalk out of a service line with a ball you could barely see. Now, if no tennis were played for a hundred years and then were revived, its enthusiasts would scoff at stories of Tilden's magic. The gun-toters of old were in a class with Tilden—they practiced their sport in deadly earnest, for if they missed a shot they didn't just make a face to the gallery. They didn't have any face.



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give me only 15 minutes a day

THE mastery of English is one of the greatest assets in the business world. It gives you a tremendous advantage over others who lack it. Words are most valuable tools. To those who know how to use them skilfully go rich rewards — money, power, position. For words are the foundation of all thought, all speech, and all writing. You think in words, and it is impossible to think in words you do not possess.

To broaden your thinking and strengthen the power of your mind you must first increase your vocabulary. A limited vocabulary usually means limited thought, limited power, and limited authority.

People judge your mental ability by your use of English. If your language is stiff and stilted, if your speech is slovenly, if you make obvious mistakes in grammar and pronunciation, you are under a serious handicap. If your speech is clear and precise, your expressions varied and interesting, you are recognized as a person of culture and ability.

The BIG JOBS usually go to men who are able to express themselves in fluent, convincing, clear-cut English. People have confidence in such men — but never in those who are always groping for words and whose thoughts are hazy and indistinct.

A PERSONAL PLAN FOR POSTWAR SUCCESS

As we all know, American industry is even now making plans for the postwar period — for the day

when millions of victorious Service men come marching home. Are you planning too? Are you, personally, going to be ready to take your place in the postwar era? Are you going to be prepared for the opportunities of a new, a hustling, and a vastly different business world?

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DEAD MAN'S DIARY

BY BRETT HALLIDAY

May 25 It is bad today - Vomited blood
after breakfast. He will die soon
I saw him
and I die

May 28 12.
in morning
experience
I saw a
man

up
the
man

Shayne took in every detail of the scene. Beatrice was dead. Her eyes were open and glazed, her lips blue, her head twisted in a manner indicating a broken neck.

CHAPTER ONE

Men Overboard

MICHAEL SHAYNE'S rangy body was comfortably settled on his living room couch. A glass of cognac and a tumbler of ice water were within easy reach on the end table. He was reading an early edition of the tabloid *Morning Tribune* which he had picked up on his way home. His telephone rang.

He scowled at the instrument, ran knobby fingers through his unruly red hair, and wriggled to the other end of the couch to answer it.

The voice of Lucy Hamilton, his secretary, came over the wire. "Michael! Come over to my apartment right away. And no wise cracks. There's a woman here who needs you desperately."

"Fine time to be dragging a man out of bed," he growled.

Lucy said, "I'll expect you in fifteen minutes," and hung up.

In twelve minutes Shayne strode into the small office of the apartment building on North

A Mike Shayne Novelette

Rampart Street bordering the French Quarter. A middle-aged woman sat near the switchboard, placidly knitting. She looked up at him incuriously as he went past her to the self-service elevator in the rear.

Lucy Hamilton was waiting for him outside her door on the third floor when he stepped from the elevator. She hurried to meet him and clutched his arm. "It's Mrs. Groat from across the hall," she said rapidly. "She's terribly worried about her husband, Michael. You've got to help her."

Shayne looked down at her flushed face and her dark, anxious eyes. She wore a chenille robe of blue belted tightly about her slim waist. Her brown hair fell in soft curls around her shoulders.

He gave her a crooked grin. "So, my clients are coming to you, eh? Why didn't you tell her to come to my office tomorrow?"

"And spend a terrifying night wondering what's become of her husband? She's in an awful state, Michael." Lucy urged him toward her open door and into the small living room.

A plump, middle-aged woman sagged against a pillow on the couch. Her hair was grayish and she wore a gray dress of snug-fitting design. She gazed up at Shayne mutely with washed blue eyes. Tears streaked her rouged cheeks and her rouge-smeared lips trembled as she dragged her body to a straight position.

"This is Mr. Shayne, my boss, Mrs. Groat," said Lucy. "I know he'll help you."

Shayne gravely pressed her limp hand and turned to look at a swarthy man who had risen from his chair when Shayne entered the room.

"This is Mr. Cunningham, Michael," Lucy said. "He's a shipmate of Mr. Groat's, and he's awfully worried, too."

Cunningham was of medium height, stocky,

Jasper Groat was a tidy man with a tidy conscience. This very passion for neatness—he had seen fit to record all the harrowing details of the torpedoing of the S. S. *Okeechobee* and his subsequent experiences on a life raft—caused his murder. For another man had died on the raft and, as Mike Shayne explained: "When a man thinks he's going to die he tells things he wouldn't dream of telling otherwise — things that wouldn't look good in print."



and thirtyish. His face was deeply bronzed, his hair a short black stubble, and he wore bell-bottomed blue serge trousers with a wide, tight waistband. He held out a small, stubby hand covered with black hairs and took Shayne's in an iron grip. "Pleased to meetcha, Mr. Shayne," he said, and showed incredibly large white teeth in a thick-lipped smile.

Shayne nodded. As Cunningham took his hand away, Shayne saw a purple and yellow anchor tattooed on it.

"Suppose you tell me about everything," he said to Lucy. "You know what's important and what isn't." He motioned her to sit beside Mrs. Groat on the couch.

"Well, Mr. Groat went out at eight o'clock, telling his wife he'd be gone not more than an hour. He didn't tell her where he was going—just that he had to attend to something. By eleven o'clock she was becoming worried, and then Mr. Cunningham called to ask for her husband. He had had an appointment to meet him at nine o'clock and had been waiting for two hours. She asked Mr. Cunningham to come up to the apartment, and after they talked it over, she came across the hall to ask my advice. You see, she knows I work for you, and—well, she thought I'd know what to do."

Shayne turned to Cunningham. "You say you and Groat are shipmates?"

"In the Merchant Marine. If you noticed yesterday's papers—"

"Don't you remember that feature story on the front page, Michael?" Lucy interrupted eagerly. "About the two seamen who were rescued from a lifeboat after their ship had been torpedoed near the Panama Canal?"

"Leslie Cunningham," Shayne muttered, "and Jasper Groat. You're an able seaman and he—"

"Was the third engineer," Cunningham supplied. "This was our first trip together and I didn't know Jasper well until the ship was torpedoed, but I got to know him mighty well during the two weeks we were in a lifeboat together. You sure get to know a guy when a thing like that happens."

Shayne said: "Two weeks in a lifeboat. You don't look any the worse for it."

"It wasn't too bad. The boat was stocked with grub and water. The sun was the worst thing—and not knowing when . . ." He broke off with a shrug. "I reckon it was Jasper's faith pulled us through."

MRS. GROAT began to sob. "Jasper was always a pious man. But he was changed this time, Mr. Shayne. He was moody and worried. He wouldn't talk to me about any of it. Something was bothering him. He kept saying that maybe we'd have a lot of money right soon, but he wouldn't tell me how or why."

"I reckon he meant his diary," Cunningham

said, looking down at his short, stubby feet. "Jasper kept a diary all the time we were afloat. Yesterday morning when the reporters were interviewing us, one of them asked him about publishing it. In a lot of newspapers, y' know. He told Jasper it might be worth a deal of money and said he'd see him about it later."

"Wasn't there another man in the lifeboat with you?" Lucy asked.

Cunningham lifted his head slowly to look at her. He wet his pudgy cracked lips. "At first . . . there was. A soldier from off the troopship, name of Albert Hawley. He was hurt inside in the explosion and we pulled him out of the water. He lived four-five days. Jasper nursed him the best he could but it wasn't any use. He died with Jasper holding him in his arms at night and we buried him at sea next morning."

"Jasper talked about him a lot," Mrs. Groat said. "He lived right here in New Orleans. His mother is that rich Mrs. Hawley. Jasper expected them to call him up after the newspaper story came out. He didn't know whether he ought to call them or not. Seemed as though that was partly what troubled him."

"You have no idea where he went tonight?" Shayne asked.

She shook her head despairingly. "But I know he made a telephone call when I was out this afternoon. He was just hanging up when I came back. He acted strange about it. He denied making any call and got mad when I insisted I'd heard him as I came in. I heard him say, 'I'll expect you first thing in the morning,' and then he hung up."

Shayne asked: "What about some friends he might have gone to see? He may have changed his mind after he went out."

"No. He would've told me." She wiped her eyes with a rouge-mottled handkerchief. "You see, we were going out to dinner to celebrate when he came back. We always do when he comes in from a voyage." She began to sob, and moaned: "Oh, I know something awful has happened to him. I just *know* it."

"She's right," Cunningham said soberly. "The dinner was going to be on me. We planned it all in the lifeboat. He called me up about eight o'clock to remind me of it. I know he wouldn't run out on me."

Shayne said: "There's not much I can do tonight. Have you called the police?"

Mrs. Groat echoed, "The police?" faintly. Her eyes, dried of tears, stared tragically at Shayne.

"Of course," he said. He went to the phone and dialed. After a brief conversation with the desk sergeant, he hung up and went toward the door, saying: "The police haven't heard anything so far. They'll call you if they do. I'll have a look into things tomorrow."

Cunningham stood up. "I might as well go along, Mrs. Groat. I'll call you first thing in the morning, and I sure hope Jasper turns up all right." He turned to Lucy, his black eyes running boldly over her slight figure. His lips made a sucking sound when he said: "Good night."

Shayne had his hand on the doorknob. He sauntered back into the room and sat down.

When Cunningham went out, Lucy turned flaming cheeks to Shayne and flared: "Did you see the way he looked at me?"

Shayne chuckled. "He's just been rescued after two weeks adrift in a lifeboat." Then to Mrs. Groat: "If you haven't heard from your husband in the morning, call me at my office."

Mrs. Groat dragged herself up from the deep cushions. Lucy put an arm around her and accompanied her to her apartment across the hall.

Shayne let himself down in the elevator. In the office he stopped before the woman who was still placidly knitting and asked: "Do you keep a record of calls through the switchboard?"

She said, "Outgoing calls," without looking up.

"Will you check a call about four o'clock this afternoon from 311? It's police business."

Her fingers stopped in the middle of a stitch. She glanced up at Shayne, startled. Without a word, she consulted a sheet of paper clamped to a board on the switchboard and said: "That was long-distance. To Mrs. Leon Wallace in Littleboro."

Shayne laid a dollar-bill on the desk and said: "I'd like to talk to Mrs. Leon Wallace in Littleboro."

"You can take the call in there," she stammered, indicating a booth in the corner of the small office.

Shayne waited a full five minutes before the booth phone rang. He lifted the receiver and said: "Hello."

An operator said brightly: "On your call to Littleboro . . . there is no answer. Shall I keep trying?"

"Cancel it." He hung up and went back to the anxious-eyed woman at the switchboard. "Do you know Mr. Groat in 311?"

"Yes. He and his wife have lived here for two years."

"Did you see him tonight when he went out?"

She said: "He stopped and asked me the best way to get to Labarre Street." She started to pick up her knitting but, instead, turned back to Shayne with a frown riding the gold bridge of her spectacles. "He made a phone call from the booth there before he went out."

Shayne went back into the booth and thumbed through the names under H until he found Mrs. Sarah Hawley on Labarre. Then he walked out to his car parked at the curb.

A man moved forward from the shadows beside the building. "Just a minute, Mr. Shayne," Leslie Cunningham said. "If you've got time I'd like to talk to you."



HE detective stopped. "It's pretty late," he said.

"This is important. It's about Groat."

"Why didn't you do your talking upstairs?"

"I didn't want to talk in front of his wife." Cunningham made an important gesture. "No use getting her any more worried than she is."

Shayne swung into a long-legged stride. "If you've got something to say, let's find a place where we can sit down."

Cunningham's shorter legs fell into un-rhythmic step. "There's a place around the corner here on Toulouse," he suggested. "I'll buy a drink."

"Why didn't you say so?" They turned right on Toulouse and, halfway down the block, went into a barroom.

Jarring music from a rear room drifted through a heavy pall of smoke. Three men supported hunched shoulders with their elbows on the bar.

"Let's go on back where we can sit at a table," Cunningham muttered, waving his hand and saying, "Hi, Louie," to the bartender as he passed.

The juke-box jive grew louder and the smoke heavier when they pushed through the swinging door into the rear room. They found a vacant booth and slid into it.

A pretty girl wearing a dirty apron came over and flicked a dirty rag across the table, then asked: "What'll you gents have?"

Shayne said: "A double shot of the best brandy you can find in the joint."

Cunningham ordered a double bourbon with plain water. The waitress slouched away, the music stopped, and when another record dropped into place, he leaned toward Shayne and said: "As I understand it, you ain't hooked up with the cops, Mr. Shayne."

My letterheads say I'm a private investigator," Shayne told him. "Tell me about your sea rescue."

"It wasn't much." Cunningham made a deprecatory gesture. "Tough to get rolled out in the middle of the night with a ship breaking to pieces under you, but we came out all right. We had a sail rigged up and would've made it to land all right if the rescue ship hadn't picked us up."

The girl brought their drinks. Cunningham laid out a dollar-and-a-half and she took it away.

"If you come onto something not just right,"

the sailor said slowly, "you can keep your mouth shut, huh? You don't have to blab all you know? Like a lawyer—you got a right to protect your client?"

Shayne's lips thinned a trifle against his teeth. He held the glass of brandy to his nose and scowled, set it down on the table and said gently: "Like a lawyer. What's on your mind?"

"I'm plenty worried about Groat. Something bad's happened to him. I know it. You know how it is when you think maybe you're going to die. You plan to have a big celebration if you come out alive. I was gonna blow him to the dinner, and Jasper wouldn't have passed it up." Cunningham was watching Shayne intently. He was nervous and tight-strung.

"Any idea where he went tonight?" Shayne poured brandy into his mouth and swallowed it quickly, then chased it with water.

"Yeah. I think I have. I can't go to the police, see?"

"Why not?"

"Because they'll ask too many questions. It's a long story. Less you know about it the better it'll be. It's Jasper's diary I'm thinking of."

"The diary some reporter said he might buy from Groat for publication?"

"That's it. He was writing in it all the time we were shipwrecked. Put everything down, see? Everything we said and what he thought. He was a great one for thinking."

"What about the diary?"

"I want it. That is, if anything's happened to Jasper I want it bad. It's got—a lot of stuff about me in it." The sailor took a big drink of bourbon and ran his tongue over his lips.

"Stuff you don't want published?"

"That's it. I told Jasper to lay off giving it to that reporter. He wouldn't listen to me."

"What kind of stuff?" Shayne persisted.

Cunningham's faint smile showed his big white teeth. His tone took on a lighter vein when he said: "You know how it is when a man thinks he might die. He tells all sorts of things he wouldn't think of telling anybody otherwise. Things that wouldn't look good in print."

Shayne asked: "Did Groat turn the diary over to the reporter?" He finished his drink and thumped the glass down.

"Yeah. Yesterday morning, he did. You know how it was at the dock—a lot of excitement and all. The reporter high-pressured him, telling him how much money it was worth."

"Has the reporter still got it?"

"I don't know. He and Jasper may have got together later. That's what I want to find out."

"You want me to get it back for you?"

"I want to know where I stand." Cunningham's black eyes glittered. "If something's happened to Jasper, like I think, could they go ahead and publish it anyway?"

"You mean if Groat is dead?" Shayne asked casually.

"Yeah."

Shayne shrugged his wide shoulders. "That would depend on whether they had legally completed a deal, I suppose. Or whether the newspaper could make a deal with Mrs. Groat. It would become her property on her husband's death."

Cunningham sucked in his breath sharply. "Then I got to get it back." His voice was harsh, and he pounded the table with his fist.

The waitress hurried to the table, glared at the sailor, started to say something, but Shayne stopped her by saying, "Two more, sister," pushing his glass toward her.

"You can sue if they print anything libelous," Shayne told him when the girl had swished angrily away.

"It ain't that," he grated. He ground his teeth together and added: "Suing wouldn't do any good. I don't want it published."

THE girl came with the drinks, slammed them on the table, slopping liquor over the rims of the glasses. "What the hell!" Cunningham yelled.

"I'm a lady, see?" she said, with arms akimbo. "Next time you want service, don't go pounding on the table."

Shayne chuckled. "He wasn't pounding for you," he explained. "It was—for another reason altogether."

She looked down her nose at Shayne, said, "Huh!" and marched regally away.

Shayne asked sharply and suddenly: "Are the Hawleys mixed up in this thing?"

Cunningham's lower jaw sagged and his black eyes stared at Shayne, frightened. "What makes you think that?" he stammered.

"Groat went out there at eight o'clock."

"Look here, fella, how the hell do you know that?"

"I'm a detective," Shayne reminded him.

"Maybe I got things wrong," he muttered. "I didn't know you came into the picture until your secretary called you."

"I didn't."

"Then how—what do you know about the Hawleys?"

"I know he went out there at eight. He called you and told you he was going, didn't he?"

"Yeah," snarled Cunningham. "The fool! I told him to lay off. I told him it was dangerous. But he wouldn't listen to me."

"Dangerous?" Shayne lifted one bristly red brow.

"Albert Hawley told us about his folks before he died," Cunningham muttered angrily. "They're rich and the old lady's plenty tough, I reckon. From what Albert told us I wouldn't put anything past her."

"What about Leon Wallace?"

Cunningham's glass was halfway to his lips. His arm jerked and liquor spilled on his hand. "You know about him, too?" he said slowly.

Shayne didn't say anything. His gaunt features were expressionless. He watched the sailor gulp the double shot.

"I don't get it," Cunningham said. "How do you fit in the picture? Was that whole thing a plant tonight? Pretending all of it was news to you when you come over to Miss Hamilton's apartment?"

Shayne said: "It's my business to know things."

"From the reporter, huh? After he read the diary he knew what kind of dynamite was tied up in it. And you knew the whole story all the time."

"I'm adding up as we go along," Shayne told him placidly.

Cunningham lit a cigarette, squinted at Shayne through half-closed eyes as he puffed.

Shayne settled back, sipped his brandy with an expression of distaste and watched the sailor struggle with an unpleasant decision.

"So you're cutting yourself a slice," Cunningham said finally. "That's all right. There'll be plenty for both of us. Do you know where the diary is now?"

"I haven't the slightest idea."

"We got to get hold of it," Cunningham said.

Shayne lit a cigarette and waited. Cunningham hunched his thick shoulders over the table and drummed his stubby fingers in spilled liquor.

"Publication is the surest way of ruining the blackmail value of the diary," Shayne watched him closely.

Cunningham gave a surly grunt. "I don't know how much Jasper told Mrs. Wallace over the phone. Damn him! If only he'd played along and let me handle it. . ."

"But he had to stick his neck out?" Shayne prodded.

"Too damned much religion," Cunningham assented moodily. "When a guy gets fanatical like that, there's no reasoning with him."

"Do you think the Hawleys bumped him off tonight?"

"I don't know what he walked into out there. I warned him about what might happen."

"If he had the diary with him it may be too late to do anything about it," Shayne said casually.

"I don't see why. If he's dead and it's been destroyed, that's all right, too. Just so we can keep it from being published."

Shayne said: "I see." He didn't see at all.

"What's your hook-up with the reporter?" the sailor demanded. "You admitted you got all the dope from him."

"That was your idea."

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Cunningham turned a murderous glare upon Shayne's tranquillity. "It must have been the reporter," he growled. "Mrs. Groat didn't act as if she even knew you tonight. Jasper wouldn't go to a private dick about it."

Shayne spun his empty glass round and round and made no reply.

"It must've been the reporter," Cunningham argued. Then after a moment of frowning thought: "Unless it was the Hawleys." He clamped his thick lips together and stared suspiciously at Shayne. "That could be it. *They* might've gone to a private dick. Maybe, by God, you've been stringing me along all this time!"

Shayne went right on keeping his mouth shut.

"Letting me spill my guts," Cunningham muttered. "Pretending to be on my side while you're working for them all the time."

Shayne said pleasantly: "I'll buy a drink." He saw the girl across the room, beckoned to her, and said to the sailor: "You've got a bad habit of jumping to conclusions."

After the waitress took the empty glasses away and brought their drinks, Shayne said: "You're too jumpy for this sort of work, Cunningham. If the police get hold of you they'll wring you dry in a couple of hours."

Cunningham half-rose from his chair, his fist clenched. Shayne didn't move from his relaxed position. The sailor slowly settled back and said: "Yeah. I reckon I'm on edge. What the hell! Arguing with Jasper in that damned lifeboat. . ." He let the sentence trail off.

Shayne emptied his glass and asked: "Where can I get in touch with you?"

"I don't know if I want you to."

"O.K." Shayne got up. He gave Cunningham his apartment address and telephone number. "You'll find my office listed in the directory."

CHAPTER TWO

Missing Male



HAYNE had just finished his usual breakfast of scrambled eggs, toast, and coffee royal when his telephone rang. He hastily consulted his watch. It was ten o'clock.

Lucy Hamilton's reproachful voice answered when he picked up the receiver. "How long do you think I can keep a client waiting?"

"We haven't any clients," he protested.

"That's fine, Mr. Shayne," she answered brightly. "I'll tell Mrs. Wallace you'll be right down." She hung up.

Half an hour later he was facing Mrs. Leon Wallace across his office desk. Although she

was sitting perfectly still, she looked brisk. There was a hard slimness about the woman in spite of her broad hips, a weathered, healthy glow in her browned face. She wore a brown tweed skirt and a tan, mannish blouse. Her straight brown hair, cropped close, looked windblown, and a cloth hat lay in her lap. Her light brown eyes were grave and anxious, yet managed to give the impression that she was in a hurry.

Shayne said: "What is your trouble, Mrs. Wallace?"

"I want you to find a man for me, Mr. Shayne. I'm a stranger in New Orleans. That is, I live in Littleboro and don't get in very often. I have a farm to look after and don't have the time." Her voice was deep, almost husky.

Shayne pushed a button on his desk and didn't say anything while he waited for Lucy to come in.

"I can pay you," Mrs. Wallace said. She put her purse on top of her hat and opened it. Her hands were rough, her nails broken to the quick.

Shayne made a swift negative gesture. Lucy came in and he said: "Since you've been discussing the case with Mrs. Wallace, you'd better sit in on this." Then to his client: "Tell me about the man you've lost."

"His name is Jasper Groat. He called me yesterday afternoon and asked me to come in and see him. I caught the midnight train and came right in. I went straight to his apartment this morning and he wasn't there. His wife said he hadn't been there all night. Then she advised me to see Miss Hamilton across the hall—that you might be able to help me."

Smoke spiraled upward from Shayne's cigarette. He frowned at the smoke and asked: "Did you have a definite appointment with Mr. Groat?"

"Yes. I told him what train I'd take and he told me to come to his apartment. I think something has happened to him. We've got to find him because it's my only hope of finding Leon."

"Leon?"

"My husband. He's been gone for two years. Mr. Groat said he could tell me all about Leon, and now he's vanished—just as Leon did two years ago."

Shayne glanced at Lucy. She was leaning forward eagerly, cupping her chin in her palm. He said impatiently: "You'd better tell me about your husband. Start at the beginning."

Mrs. Wallace bent toward him slightly, her back straight as a ramrod. "It happened two years ago in March. The farm wasn't doing so well and Leon came to New Orleans to find a job. I had a couple of letters from him, cheerful letters. He got a job working as gardener with

a wealthy family, the Hawleys. He sent me money for the children and myself to move to New Orleans. Before we could make arrangements to leave the farm, I had another letter from him." Her cloth purse was still open. She took the letter out and handed it to Shayne.

"There were ten one-thousand-dollar bills in the letter," she added.

Shayne slowly unfolded the two sheets of paper and read:

"Dear Myra,

Don't be frightened at all this money. You'd better bring it to New Orleans and put it in the bank. They won't ask questions here as they would in Littleboro. It'll be enough to take care of you and the children. I have to go away and I don't know when you'll hear from me again. Maybe never. I can't help it. Don't tell anybody anything. Don't ask questions. I'm all right, Myra. I'll be all right as long as you don't make a fuss. Don't tell anybody about the money. Just go ahead and use it. You can tell people I've enlisted in the army or something. Don't worry about me. Don't go to the police or try to find me. It's best this way. It's more money than I could ever make on the farm or on a job like this. There'll be another thousand dollars every six months if you keep your mouth shut and don't try to find me. You've got to trust me. Kiss both the children for me. Your loving husband, Leon."

The old, brittle paper crackled loudly in the stillness of the office when Shayne stopped reading and refolded the letter.

Lucy's cheeks were flushed with excitement. She said: "And she hasn't heard another word from him, Mike. But the money has come every six months, just as he promised. A thousand-dollar-bill in an envelope without any letter."

"They were mailed from New Orleans," Mrs. Wallace supplied. "At first I was grieved and terrified, naturally. But I found out that crying and moping don't go with running a farm." Her manner was direct, forthright. She looked away from Shayne and added softly: "The worst thing was—I couldn't believe he would do such a thing to the children."

"Does he send the money?"

She nodded. "The handwriting on the envelope is Leon's."

Shayne leaned back and rubbed his angular jaw. "Did you make any investigation when it first happened?"

"No. I was determined to at first, but after reading that letter over and over, I was afraid of getting him into serious trouble. It seemed best for the children that I keep quiet."

"And the money?" Shayne asked gently.

"I deposited the money in the bank. I did

call up the Hawley house to ask about Leon. I didn't let on that anything was wrong. But the man I talked to, the butler I imagine, said Leon had quit his job a few days before and hadn't left any address."

"Did he work for Mrs. Sarah Hawley?"

"Yes. On Labarre Street."

"So you deposited the money and drew on it for living expenses?"

Mrs. Wallace bristled. "I put it in the bank, all right, but I didn't use a penny of it. It's still there. I've made out all right on the farm. I expected Leon to come back any time and was sure he'd need that money, fourteen thousand in all, to keep him out of trouble."

SHAYNE drew in a long breath. After a moment of silence he asked: "What sort of a man was your husband?"

"Leon was a good man," she answered promptly. "I never knew him to do anything wrong. That's why I didn't understand any of this. I'm sure he loved me and the children. Naturally, there have been times when I was bitter against him, and that helped me bear up under the strain. I would've been content just to go on waiting if Mr. Groat hadn't phoned me. I begged him to tell me whether Leon was alive and all right, but he wouldn't. It's the uncertainty that has me upset, Mr. Shayne."

"Did Groat say anything about money?" Shayne asked bluntly.

"No, he didn't."

"Did you have a feeling that he expected you to pay him for his information? Did he intimate that was his reason for wanting to see you in person rather than telling you about it over the phone?"

"I can't say. I was too excited, I guess, and he hung up right away."

"How many people know about the money in the bank?"

"No one," she said emphatically. "I've never told anyone about it."

"The police are already looking for Groat," Shayne said slowly. "Any information you have might help them."

"No!" The word was a sharp cry. Fear was suddenly stark in her eyes. "That's why I came to you, Mr. Shayne," she said rapidly. "Miss Hamilton said you wouldn't have to go to the police. Don't you see, I can't tell them about Leon. I don't know what he might have done two years ago—or what he's been doing since then. Can't you find out without going to the police?" Her brisk manner was gone, but there was no sign of tears.

Shayne's eyes narrowed. "Let me get this straight. Your only interest in having me find Groat is your hope that he'll be able to clear up the mystery about your husband? And you

want me to do it rather than the police so you'll have a chance to get this information and prevent it from being made public?"

Mrs. Wallace recovered her poise and stiffened her spine. "That's what I thought. I was thinking of the possible disgrace to the children." She paused for a long moment, then went on calmly: "I want you to find Leon. No matter how much it costs. I feel that I can use some of that money he's been sending me toward finding him."

Shayne nodded. "Will you stay in town for a while?"

"I can't do that. I left the children with a neighbor and I'll have to take the afternoon train back."

Shayne considered her answer. "That will probably be best," he agreed. "I'll get in touch with you the moment I have something to report. Give Miss Hamilton your telephone number."

Lucy said: "Shall I—"

"There won't be any retainer right now," Shayne interrupted. "I'll check a few angles, and if I'm able to accomplish anything I'll send you a bill." He got up and stood behind his desk while Lucy and Mrs. Wallace went to the reception room.

Lucy's brown eyes were dancing when she returned alone. "I'm going to expect a cut on this case, Mr. Shayne—after dragging you into it by your bristly red topknot."

Shayne grinned. "Anything new on Groat?"

"Nothing. Mrs. Groat has practically collapsed."

"Does Mrs. Wallace know about the sea rescue and Groat's hook-up with Albert Hawley?"

"No, I'm sure she doesn't. And Mrs. Groat doesn't know anything about Leon Wallace except that he has been missing two years. Mrs. Wallace told her about Groat's telephone call. What do you suppose it's all about, Mike?"

"God knows," he groaned. He rumped his hair vigorously and drew a sheet of paper in front of him.

Lucy sat down and watched with interest the illegible marks Shayne made on the paper.

Shayne said: "We've got Groat and Cunningham marooned in a lifeboat with a wounded soldier who died after being adrift a few days. Groat was a religious cuss and nursed Albert Hawley the best he could, but he died in Groat's arms. Hawley must have known he was dying and confided something that weighed on Groat's conscience, so his wife thinks. Groat also talked about coming into a sum of money soon. Probably the diary, according to Cunningham. We can check on that. Groat secretly called Mrs. Wallace and asked her to come to New Orleans to learn the truth about her husband, then angrily denied the call to his wife. Groat went out at eight,

promising to be back at nine, asked the switchboard operator how to get out to Labarre Street where the Hawleys live, then made a phone call and left. That's the last anyone saw of him."

"Check," said Lucy.

Shayne stopped making marks on the paper and flung the pencil across the room. He got up and strode over to pick up his hat.

"Where are you going?" Lucy asked.

"Right now I want to find out if Albert Hawley was at home two years ago when Leon Wallace took a runout powder and sent his wife that screwy letter with ten grand enclosed." He stopped on his way out and turned to Lucy, frowning. "Do you know how to get hold of Mrs. Wallace before she goes back?"

"No. But I know when her train leaves."

"Catch her at the depot. Have her paged. I want to know if she has any of those later envelopes containing the semi-annual payments. I want them. And I want the name of the bank where she claims the money is deposited, and a picture of her husband. If you don't catch her at the depot, phone her at Littleboro as soon as she gets home." He rammed his hat down and went out in long, driving strides.



HAYNE went directly to the Missing Persons Bureau at police headquarters. Sergeant Pepper sat at his desk, a big, hulking man with stooped shoulders and thinning hair. He had been in charge of the Bureau for twenty years and carried more information in his head than in the filing cases behind him. He nodded solemnly to Shayne.

Shayne slid into a chair in front of the desk and asked: "Anything on Jasper Groat?"

The sergeant had no discernible sense of humor. He blinked his eyes and looked meditative. "Missing since last night. Nope. You in on that, Mike?"

"Friend of his wife," Shayne explained casually. "I was over there last night and reported it for her. Here's the only lead I could pick up. He may have taken a taxi from his apartment house out to the Hawley residence on Labarre at eight last night. Will you check that?"

A flicker of interest showed in the sergeant's cold blue eyes. He rumbled: "Hawley? Son died in the lifeboat with Groat. Rich as all get-out."

"That's the one. Have you got him in your files?"

"Nope."

"Or Leon Wallace?"

"Nope."

"You may be able to find the cab driver who took Groat out there."

"That's our business," Sergeant Pepper agreed drily.

Shayne said: "If you pick up anything, let me know."

The sergeant nodded and Shayne went out to his car. He drove out to South Claiborne and angled out on the Jefferson Highway to Labarre just a short distance north of the levee.

Shayne drove between towering concrete gateposts onto a curving gravel drive leading through a grove of moss-draped oaks to an aged two-story plantation house with stately columns supporting a broad second-story gallery. Magnolia and crepe myrtle trees pressed in close to the house, and to the left a sunken garden lay untended and desolate.

Silence enveloped the proud old mansion, and an atmosphere of decay pervaded the neglected exterior and the neglected grounds. The land was low, and luxuriant ferns grew rampant in the damp soil around the veranda.

Shayne parked directly behind a black sedan in the driveway. The air was hot and humid, heavy with cloying, tropical odors. He mopped his brow as he went up the steps and pounded on the door with a bronze knocker.

The door opened so silently it startled him. A bent old Negro said, "Yassuh," softly.

Shayne said: "I want to see Mrs. Sarah Hawley."

"Nossuh. Ahm sorry. Not 'thout you got a 'pointment."

Shayne put his hand against the edge of the door and pushed. He strode past the servant into a wide, gloomy hall running the length of the house. He heard a murmur of voices from a room halfway down the hall and started walking in that direction. The old Negro shuffled along behind him, protesting loudly.

A tall man carrying a briefcase in one hand and a Panama hat in the other emerged from the doorway. His hair was a silvery mane flowing back from a strong, bony face, and he wore an outmoded suit of light gray.

He stopped in front of Shayne and asked: "Sir, what is the meaning of this unwarranted intrusion?"

"I'm looking for Mrs. Sarah Hawley."

"And who are you, sir?"

"A detective."

"May I see your credentials?"

"Who are you?" countered Shayne.

The man extracted a card from his pocket and handed it to Shayne. It read: *Hastings & Brandt, Attorneys-at-Law*. Engraved in the lower right-hand corner was, *B. H. Hastings*.

"I am legal counsellor to Mrs. Hawley. I'll have your credentials and hear your business."

Shayne said, "I'm private and my business is with Mrs. Hawley," and moved forward.

"Mrs. Hawley is—ah—overcome with grief," Hastings appealed, moving beside the detective. "Her son was recently lost at sea and I have just completed the sad task of reading the will of her brother-in-law who died unexpectedly only ten days ago."

Shayne said: "I know about her son. Brother-in-law, too, eh?" He went through the open doorway.

THE room was large and gloomy. Heavy drapes shut out the light from long French windows, the rugs were faded and worn, the upholstery of the antique furniture in need of repair.

A tall woman rose from a spindle-legged chair and stood very erect. Everything about her came to a peak—her long, thin nose, the high mound of white hair, her cheekbones, and her prominent pointed chin. Her eyes were cavernous and glowing beneath heavy gray brows. She wore a high-necked, long-sleeved black dress that came down to the pointed tips of small black shoes. She looked at Shayne who stood in the doorway and said harshly: "Well, who is it?"

An overstuffed young man lounged on an antique sofa. He wore a velvet smoking jacket and dark trousers. He was partially bald and his lips pouted sullenly. He didn't look up at Shayne.

The third occupant of the room was long and lanky and shapeless. She wore clinging silk slacks and slouched on a horsehair sofa. Her black hair was short with a fringe of bangs across her forehead. Except for a short upper lip, she was a replica of Sarah Hawley. She made no move at Shayne's entrance except to turn her head slightly in his direction to survey him with half-closed eyes.

Shayne went over to the group, followed by the family lawyer. He asked: "Are you Mrs. Hawley?"

"Suppose I am," she snapped.

"Did Jasper Groat come to see you last night?"

"You're not required to answer that, Mrs. Hawley," Lawyer Hastings said hastily. "This man has forced his way into your home. He has no legal standing whatsoever."

"Nonsense," snorted Mrs. Hawley. "Why shouldn't I answer him? I don't know any Jasper Groat. No one came here last night."

"Did you expect him?" Shayne persisted. "Did he telephone you yesterday to say he was coming?"

"Why should he? I don't know the man."

"Do you read the newspapers?"

"I know whom he's talking about." The girl's voice was languid and she spoke with almost no movement of her lips. "Jasper Groat is one of the men who was in the lifeboat when Albert died."

"He didn't come here," Mrs. Hawley persisted.

Shayne shrugged. "Most people would have looked Groat up under the circumstances. It was reasonable to suppose he might have brought a dying message from your son."

"Nonsense," the old lady said fiercely. "No Hawley would make a confidant of such riff-raff."

The girl lazily drew herself to a sitting position. "Groat called here on the phone yesterday," she said. "I asked him to come out at eight last night."

"Beatrice! I told you I wanted no contact with those ruffians who allowed Albert to die while they saved their own skins."

"I know, Mother." Beatrice smiled unpleasantly.

"Yet you deliberately invited that man here against my wishes." Sarah Hawley's eyes blazed with anger. She lifted one clawlike hand in a threatening gesture.

"Perhaps you wish now he had come—after what Mr. Hastings just told us," Beatrice said languidly.

There was silence in the big room. The fat young man stirred, sat up, leaned forward and dropped his chin into cupped palms. He scowled into space.

Hastings said to the girl: "This man is a private detective. I don't think he's interested in the family affairs, Mrs. Meany."

"It's time someone got interested," she retorted.

"That will be quite enough, Beatrice," her mother said. She turned to dismiss Shayne. "You may go, young man."

Shayne turned to Beatrice Meany. "Are you quite sure Mr. Groat didn't reach here last night?"

She lowered her eyelids, caught her underlip between her teeth, let go of it and said: "I'm quite sure I didn't see him."

Shayne stood for a long moment looking at the young man on the sofa. Beatrice giggled and said: "Believe it or not, that's *my* husband, Gerald Meany, Mr.—"

"Shayne. Michael Shayne."

Without moving a muscle, Gerald Meany muttered: "Don't pay any attention to that drunken hussy."

"Gerald!" the old lady screeched in a menacing voice.

Shayne's upper lip drew back from his teeth in a distasteful grimace. He whirled on his heels and stalked to the door.

In the hallway he felt a grip on his arm and turned to see Beatrice just behind him. She gestured for silence, walked along until she reached the stairway, then, with surprising strength, urged him up the steps. "I've got a drink up in my room—and I've got to tell you something."

CHAPTER THREE

The Hateful Hawleys

BEATRICE hurtled Shayne into an attractive upstairs sitting room. The walls were freshly-papered with a light, gay pattern and the furniture was covered with bright chintz. She closed the door and moved with a swinging stride to a small bookcase. She removed two books and brought out a pint bottle half-full of whiskey, pulled the cork with her teeth and held the bottle out to Shayne. "We'll have to take it straight. It's too much trouble to sneak ice and mixers up here."

Shayne put the bottle to his mouth, swallowed twice without letting much liquor pass down his throat. He handed it back to the girl. She drank half of it, set the bottle on a table, wiped the back of her hand across her mouth and said, "More damn fun!" delightedly.

Here in the light from windows, she looked much older. There was an abrasive hardness about her that startled Shayne. In the gloomy room downstairs, she had seemed childish and defiant. Now, her slate-gray eyes burned with hot intensity. She said: "If I didn't have a bottle to hit once in a while I'd go nuts."

Shayne sat down in a comfortable chair, looked up at her and asked: "Are you and Albert the only two children?"

"That's right." She stood a few feet away from him with her feet too far apart for grace. She waved her cigarette toward him and said: "Mother's a tough old witch to live with. Gerald's sort of precious, but he bores hell out of me."

"How long have you been living here with your mother?"

"Couple of years. Waiting for Uncle Ezra to die so I could get my share of the estate."

"Can't your husband support you?"

"He could, but why should he?" She shrugged her thin shoulders and flopped down on an ottoman beside the table. She reached for the bottle, took another drink and said: "Uncle Ezra's got millions. He stole it all from Dad and now he just gives Mother and me enough to keep this damned old house going."

"How did your Uncle Ezra steal your father's money?"

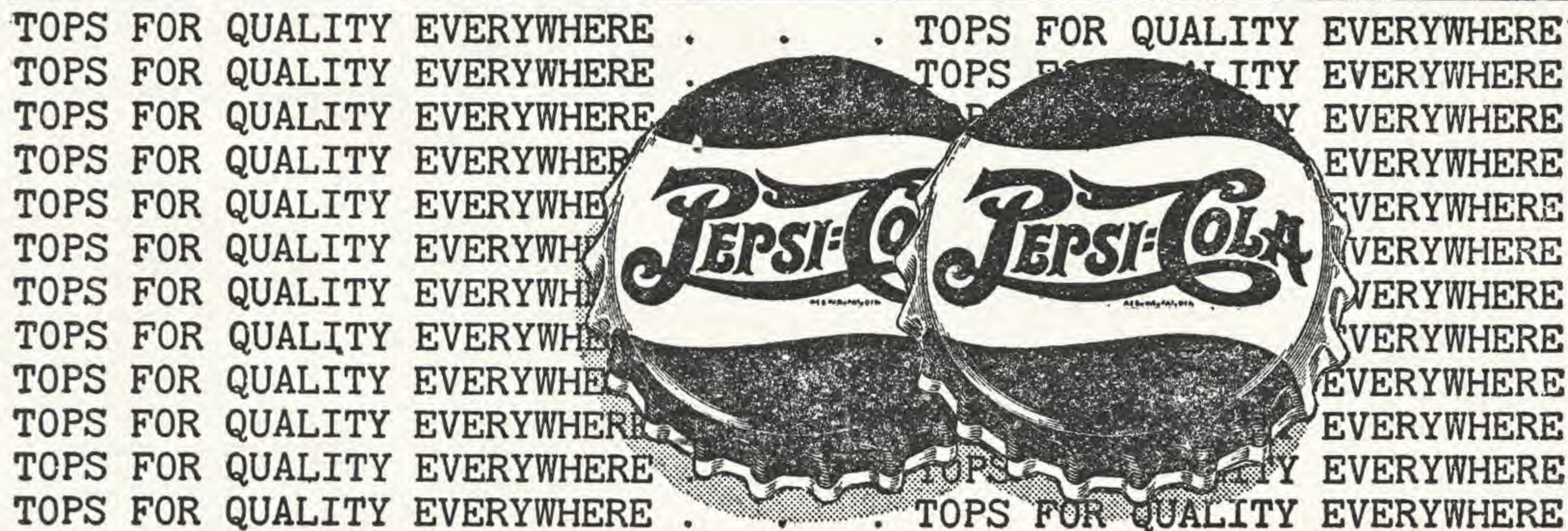
"They were in business together. When Dad died ten years ago there wasn't anything left. Mr. Hastings explained it. He explains things like that very well."

"And now your Uncle Ezra is dead?" Shayne prompted.

"Yeah. He left everything to Albert," she said angrily.

"But Albert is dead," Shayne reminded her.

Shayne went to the window, stood staring out for a moment, then stalked out the door.



He drove directly to his apartment, went up and showered, dressed from the skin out in fresh clothes. He took a long drink of cognac, and felt cleansed of the humid stench of the Hawley estate and Beatrice's rot-gut whiskey.

LUCY HAMILTON was seated at her desk in the reception room when he reached his office an hour later. "Any progress?"

"Not unless Sergeant Pepper called," said Shayne.

"He didn't." She studied him disapprovingly. "Are you just sitting around letting the police hunt for Mr. Groat?"

Shayne grinned and tossed his hat on the rack. "They're the ones to do it. Mrs. Groat hasn't any money to pay a fee, has she?"

"She's terribly upset, Michael. She's depending on you to do something. I promised you would. And there's Mrs. Wallace," Lucy went on. "She's got plenty of money."

"To pay for finding *her* husband."

"Isn't it the same thing? Find Mr. Groat and you'll find out about Mr. Wallace."

"A reasonable assumption. Did you get in touch with Mrs. Wallace?"

"At the depot. She saved those envelopes. She's going to mail them to you as soon as she gets home. Oh, yes, I got the name of the bank, too."

"Good girl." He went into his inner office, sat down in the swivel chair, put his feet on the desk and settled back.

The telephone rang in the outer office. He heard Lucy answer it. His telephone buzzer sounded. He called, "Who is it?" without opening his eyes.

"Answer your phone and see," she called back.

He picked up the receiver and said: "Shayne speaking."

"I have need of the services of a competent private detective, Mr. Shayne," a precise and resonant voice told him. "You have been recommended to me as capable and—ah—discreet."

"Who is this?"

"Mr. Hastings, of Hastings and Brandt, attorneys-at-law, in the Downtown Building. If you could call at my office at once we will discuss the assignment."

"I'll be right over." Shayne hung up, an oddly speculative grin lighting his angular face.

Lucy came to the door and asked hopefully: "Another client?"

Shayne said: "A lot of people are becoming interested in the whereabouts of Jasper Groat." He swung his feet from the desk and asked: "Do you know how to get in touch with Cunningham?" He grinned and added: "The one who looked at you last night."

Faint color came to her face. "He called me early this morning to find out if we had any word of Mr. Groat."

"And—"

"He said he'd call again this evening. I'll find out where you can reach him."

Shayne got up and yawned. "Get hold of all the papers telling about the sea rescue, Lucy. Try to get the names of all the reporters who interviewed the two men. Call the papers if the stories don't carry by-lines."

She went to her desk for a shorthand pad, made the notations in it and asked: "Is that all?"

"What I want," he explained, "is the name of the reporter who was interested in buying publication rights to Jasper Groat's diary. Remember Cunningham mentioning that last night?"

She nodded.

"That's all. Just get his name and try to arrange an appointment. I'll be back presently."

The offices of Hastings and Brandt were on the fourth floor of the Downtown Building. The dingy front office was presided over by a gnomelike little man wearing a shiny alpaca coat. He was humped over a huge legal volume. He peered at Shayne with near-sighted irritation and said: "Yes, yes? What is it?"

"I'm Michael Shayne. I think Mr. Hastings expects me."

"I guess it's all right for you to go in," he said, after consulting a memo pad. He pointed to one of two closed doors marked PRIVATE.



HAYNE opened the door without knocking. Mr. Hastings sat before an ancient rolltop desk. He looked up as Shayne entered and said: "It's you again."

"Didn't you expect me?" Shayne crossed over to an armchair beside the desk.

Mr. Hastings was confused. "Certainly not. I have no idea why you're here and I have nothing to say to you."

"I'm Michael Shayne, the private investigator who was recommended to you as being ah—discreet," Shayne told him. "I introduced myself at the Hawley house."

Mr. Hastings grew more confused. He fussed with some papers on his desk, said: "I'm sure I didn't catch the name."

"You need a private detective, don't you?" Shayne stretched his long legs. "You're on the spot with that will of Mrs. Hawley's brother-in-law leaving everything to Albert Hawley, but not to his heirs and assigns if the young man predeceased his uncle. In that case, as I understand it, his entire estate goes to Mrs. Hawley and her daughter."

"I don't care to discuss it with you, sir. I don't know what you're after or where you got hold of this information. I shall arrange for another investigator at once." He turned back to the legal forms on his desk.

Shayne said: "You've got to get hold of the two men who were in the lifeboat with Albert when he died and find out the exact date. The newspaper reports were vague on that point. The men reported that Hawley was alive either four or five days. I've checked back on the dates and find that Uncle Ezra died on the fifth day after young Hawley's ship was torpedoed. If Albert died on the fourth night, Ezra Hawley's estate goes to his sister-in-law, Mrs. Sarah Hawley, and her daughter. But if he didn't die until the *fifth* night after his ship was torpedoed, he was alive at the time of his uncle's death, and his subsequent demise will turn the entire fortune over to his divorced wife, according to the terms of the will. Am I correct thus far?"

Mr. Hastings was disturbed. He hadn't looked at Shayne during his lengthy and rapid discourse. The lawyer jerked around in his creaking swivel chair, took off his glasses with an unsteady hand, and glared at the detective. "I'm sure I don't know how you've gathered this information," he said testily, "or why you've wasted your time gathering it."

Shayne looked at him in surprise. "I always try to familiarize myself with every aspect of a case when I'm called in on it."

"But you haven't been called in on this case," Hastings said angrily.

"You were too anxious to get rid of me at the Hawleys even to learn my name. You called me in on the case not more than half an hour ago."

"And now I'm dismissing you," said Hastings. Purplish color showed in his thin face.

"I'm in and I'm staying in," Shayne said hotly. "Mrs. Hawley is your client—Albert Hawley's divorced wife, I take it, is not. It'll mean a couple of millions to your client and a nice fat fee for you to persuade Groat and Cunningham to testify that Albert Hawley died on the *fourth* night in the lifeboat. You've got to reach them before Albert's ex-wife does, because she might even go so far as to bribe them to say it was the *fifth* night. If there's any bribing done—well, you want to have the first crack at it. That's why you need me."

Hastings was nervously tapping his glasses against his palm. The purplish color heightened in his face. "Young man," he said austere, "the mere mention of bribery is repugnant to me."

Shayne said: "Fair enough. That's why you need someone else to do the dirty work and spare you the details." Shayne lit a cigarette and settled back in his chair.

Hastings played a little game with his long

thin fingers, his pale eyes studying Shayne's gaunt face and relaxed figure. He said, "Humph," finally.

Shayne asked casually: "Do you know the police are looking for Jasper Groat?"

The lawyer stiffened. "Eh? What's that?"

"Groat has been missing since about eight o'clock last night, the time Beatrice Meany invited him out to the Hawley house."

Hastings sat very still and didn't say anything.

"Beatrice Meany," Shayne went on, "is a queer one. It wouldn't surprise me if she lured him out there in order to bop him off if she couldn't persuade him to testify the way she wanted."

THE lawyer ran the edge of his tongue over his tight lips. "Do you know Miss Beatrice well?"

"Fairly well. I had a session with her in her room with a bottle of whiskey after you left."

"She's a queer girl, all right," Hastings acknowledged moodily.

"She's a dipsomaniac. Was Albert cut from the same cloth?"

"No, indeed. That is—no. Albert was weak, perhaps. His mother—ah—I'm sure you observed her domineering personality."

"Did Ezra Hawley actually steal all his brother's money?"

Hastings darted a sharp look at Shayne. "Good heavens, no! Where did you get that idea?"

"Something Beatrice said."

"It wasn't that way at all. John Hawley was a poor businessman. He made bad investments and wasted his portion of the family inheritance while Ezra increased his more than two-fold."

"And Sarah Hawley has been dependent on Ezra since her husband died?"

"Generally speaking, yes. He has provided for her generously, I believe."

"That run-down old house doesn't look like it," Shayne protested.

Hastings said: "Such matters have no bearing on the present situation."

"Perhaps not. What I was getting at is this—will Mrs. Hawley and her daughter actually be left destitute if Ezra's money goes to Albert's divorced widow?"

"Practically speaking, yes. They have very little laid aside."

"It's rather peculiar, isn't it, for a man not to change his will after a divorce?"

"Albert did change his will," Hastings admitted stiffly. "He definitely specified that his ex-wife was to receive everything, even if she remarried."

"Did his wife remarry after the divorce?"

"I believe she did, yes."

"How long ago was the divorce?"

"A matter of some two years. Shortly before Albert's induction into the armed forces."

"And was Albert living at home when he was drafted?"

"He was. He—ah—had remained at home after his marriage."

"And the date of his induction?"

After a moment's hesitation, Hastings said: "Albert was called into the army on March 18th, 1943."

Shayne took from his pocket the letter Mrs. Wallace had given him that morning. It was dated March 10th. He asked: "Did you ever hear of a man named Leon Wallace?"

Hastings gave no noticeable reaction. "I don't recall the name." He added: "I believe you understand what is required in this case, Mr. Shayne."

"You want me to locate Jasper Groat and Leslie Cunningham and get affidavits from them as to the exact date of Albert's death."

The lawyer put his glasses on, said, "Good day, Mr. Shayne," and turned back to his desk.

"My fee will be five thousand if things turn out in your favor. I'll take a retainer of two hundred now."

Hastings was plainly irritated. He started to protest, drummed his fingers on his desk, then got up and took ten twenty-dollar bills from a black metal box and handed them to Shayne. He said: "I feel it will be best to make no written memorandum of our agreement."

Shayne stuffed the bills in his pocket. "I don't like written agreements, either. But I always collect. You'll be hearing from me."

A man and woman were entering the outer office when Shayne opened Hastings' door. The man was tall and cadaverous, with arms as long as an ape's. The woman was young and smartly-groomed. She had a Mae West figure, an alert, intelligent face.

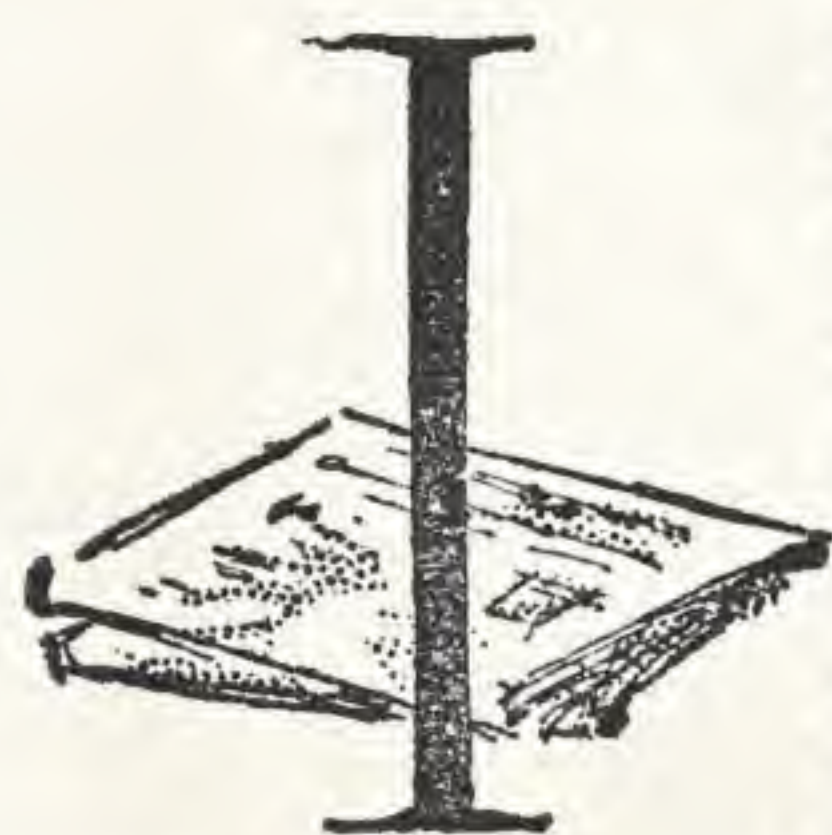
Shayne grinned at the man and said: "Hi, Jake."

Jake Sims muttered, "Hello, Shayne," and went on toward the desk of the gnomelike little man.

Shayne went out, whistling cheerily.

CHAPTER FOUR

River Stay 'Way from My Corpse



IMMEDIATELY upon entering his office, Lucy said: "Sergeant Pepper called a few minutes ago, Michael, and wants you to call him right away. And take a look at this!" She handed him an early addition of the afternoon *Item*.

Shayne's gaze fell upon a boxed item on the

front page. It was an announcement that Feature Writer Joel Cross of the *Item's* staff was making arrangements with Mr. Jasper Groat for the exclusive publication of Groat's journal kept during those harrowing days he had drifted at sea in an open lifeboat after his ship had been torpedoed. The announcement contained such phrases as: "Authentic account of heroism on the high seas . . . Vivid first-hand narrative of danger and suffering . . . What do men say and think as they live with Death all around them? . . . A record of the last words spoken by one who did not come back, and the simple story of a burial at sea that will wring the heartstrings of every reader."

He folded the paper and asked: "Anything new from Mrs. Groat?"

"She called a few minutes ago. No word from her husband. She said Leslie Cunningham had just left her apartment. He persuaded her to go through Jasper's things to try to find the diary, but it was fruitless."

Shayne thoughtfully massaged his left earlobe, then said, "Get Sergeant Pepper for me," and went into his office.

He got a pint bottle of brandy from the desk drawer, poured some in a glass and walked around as he drank it. When his desk buzzer sounded, he picked up the telephone receiver. Lucy said: "Sergeant Pepper, Mr. Shayne."

"What's on your mind, Sergeant?" Shayne asked.

"That tip you gave me was all right, Mike. We picked up the cabbie who drove Groat out to that address on Labarre last night. He identified the photograph of Groat."

"And?" Shayne's throat was dry. He wet it with a sip of brandy.

"That's all."

"Did you check with the Hawleys about his arrival?"

"No soap. None of them admits seeing him. None of them admits knowing he was coming. They don't know anything about a cab driving up at eight and letting a passenger out." Deep disgust was added to the sergeant's normally moody tone.

"How about the girl, Mrs. Beatrice Meany?"

"Her? She was drunk as a coot when I got out there. Passed out cold in bed."

Shayne took a long drink while the sergeant was talking. A deep scowl trenched his forehead. He said, "You'd better start looking for Groat's body," and hung up.

He sat down and his gray eyes brooded across the room. He sat for a long time without moving. Lucy came in and perched on a corner of his desk. She wrinkled her nose disapprovingly at the glass at his elbow. "I don't see how you ever solve a case the way you stay tanked up all the time."

Shayne laughed shortly, picked up the glass and emptied it. "Always glad to oblige by

removing the offending article. I'm going to have to get awfully drunk to figure this one out."

"I listened in on your conversation with the sergeant," she admitted. "Do you think someone at the Hawleys killed Groat?"

"I wouldn't be at all surprised, angel."

She frowned, her eyes thoughtful. "I can't understand why the Hawleys wouldn't be eager to see Mr. Groat and find out about Albert's death. Most people would."

"The whole thing is screwy," he told her moodily. He chucked the empty glass in a drawer. "I'm going out to lunch. Go out whenever you want to." He got up and stalked to the door.

Lucy intercepted him by saying: "Cunningham hasn't called yet. Maybe I'd better stick around until you get back."

"Be sure to find out where he's staying. I could use a line on him."

It was only a short walk from his office to that portion of Camp Street once known as "Newspaper Row" where there were a number of small restaurants still frequented by members of the Fourth Estate.

He tried Henri's first, because he was fairly certain of finding Roger Deems there at noon. Henri was famous for a drink of his own concoction called a Lafitte, and long custom had conditioned Deems' stomach to coping with a couple of them every day before lunch.

Shayne went down three concrete steps from the sidewalk and into a long room with a bar along one side and booths lining the other. Half a dozen men were at the bar, and some of the booths were occupied.

He saw Roger Deems' saturnine face at once. He was long and loose-jointed, a sports writer for the *Item*, and an old-timer in the city. He was leaning forward with both elbows on the bar, looking down with a melancholy expression at a highball glass half-full of a greenish, bilious-looking mixture.

Shayne went over to him and said: "You don't have to drink that thing, Roger. I'll buy you something decent."

Deems cocked one eye at him and said: "I love 'em, Mike. Mixture of rum and gin. Very healthy. Know what a Lafitte reminds me of, Mike?"

"Juicy green worms run through a wringer," Shayne told him. He held up two fingers and Henri brought a double shot of cognac in a big-topped snifter glass.

"That's why I love 'em," Deems said. He

sighed and lifted his glass, emptied it, and shuddered the length of his lanky frame. "Got anything for me, Mike?"

Shayne warmed the big glass between his palms. "Nothing right now. Do you know a guy named Joel Cross?"

"Good ol' Joel. The literary light of the Fourth Estate. I'm proud to say, suh, I have the honor of his acquaintance." He turned his head and called to one of the men sitting in a booth behind him. "You're being discussed, Mr. Cross."

A stocky, sandy-haired man with a bristly, reddish mustache and a square, aggressive face said: "Hi, Deems."

Deems wagged a long forefinger at him. "Don't know what you've done now, but here's a hell-hound on your trail. The sleuth of the Everglades. Wherever you hid the body won't be good enough once he starts sniffing."

JOEL CROSS had been smiling, but now a curious mask of hardness replaced the smile on his face. His lips tightened and his jaw jutted. He said something to his companion in the booth in a low tone, then got up and came toward them. He held his shoulders consciously squared and walked with a precise stiffness that was almost a strut. His voice was thin and metallic. "Who's taking my name in vain?"

"Mr. Shayne." Deems jerked a thumb toward the detective.

Cross said: "I've heard about you." He held out a square hand. The flesh was hard and cold. He was a head shorter than Shayne, but his shoulders were as broad and he was built solidly from the floor up.

Henri set another greenish drink in front of Deems and laid Shayne's change on the counter. Shayne gathered up his change and said to Cross: "I don't want to interrupt you, but I have something I'd like to talk over with you."

Cross said: "You're not interrupting anything. There's a vacant booth in the back." He went toward it, his heels hitting the floor hard before the soles came down.

Shayne picked up his drink and followed him, slid in opposite the feature writer for the *Item* and asked: "Drink?"

"I never touch the stuff." Cross' bristly mustache lifted slightly. "Are you on a case?"

"Sort of. I'm interested in Jasper Groat's diary."

Cross peered at Shayne. "What about it?"

A WORD TO THE WISE

Waste paper is still an important war material—it's essential for packing ammunition. So in order to make sure there's enough left over to go 'round for your favorite publication, don't forget to save all waste paper and turn it in for scrap.

"Is the stuff any good?"

"It's terrific. Raw, elemental emotion. It wasn't written for publication. That's why it's good. We'll publish it as is—no editing."

"Do you have it?"

Cross didn't answer at once. He coddled his mustache, first on one side, then the other. "I had to look it over to see if it was worth what Groat wanted," he said cautiously.

"How much was that?"

"What's your interest?" Cross parried.

"I have an idea a lot of people are going to be interested after reading the announcement in the *Item*." He hesitated a moment, then added: "Frankly, I'd like to know how much it would cost to keep it unpublished."

Cross stiffened, his eyes suspiciously alert. "I'm afraid you don't understand the newspaper business, Shayne. That diary is a scoop of the first magnitude. You can't measure the intrinsic value of something like that to a paper."

"I'd like to have a look at it," Shayne said idly.

"You can read it in the *Item*."

"I mean a preview."

Cross shook his head emphatically. "It can't be done."

Shayne took a drink of cognac and asked: "Do I understand that you've made final arrangements with Groat?"

"I don't know why our arrangements with Groat should interest you."

"I'm not at liberty to explain my interest right now. One thing you can tell me: If Groat should disappear—if he should die suddenly before you see him again—have you the legal right to publish his diary?"

"What is this?" Cross demanded. "Where is Groat?"

"Don't you know?"

"I haven't seen him since yesterday."

"You haven't answered my question," Shayne reminded him.

"I'm not going to answer it, Shayne." Cross was bristling all over. "I'll give you the same answer I gave that shyster, Jake Sims, a little while ago. He phoned me at the office to ask the same question. I don't think it's any of your business."

Shayne mused, "Jake Sims . . . well, it's nice to have met you, Cross," and got up. He went back to the bar to rejoin Deems. Joel Cross returned to his seat in the booth where his friend waited.

Deems asked: "How'd you get along with friend Joel?"

"Not too well," Shayne admitted.

"He's a cold-blooded number," Deems said cheerfully. "The kind who'd take a notebook with him on his honeymoon to record his bride's emotions for a true confession magazine."

"By the way, where does Cross live?"

"He's got a room at the Corona Arms Hotel. Does all his work there. Too high-class to pound a typewriter at the office like the rest of us."

Shayne looked across at the booth where Joel Cross sat. The waiter was just beginning to serve lunch. He said: "Well, so long, Roger. Be seeing you." He stalked out the door, walked three blocks at a brisk pace, and turned into the lobby of the Corona Arms Hotel.

A young man at the desk looked up when he went past, but Shayne went on toward the elevator. He then turned, went back to the desk and said: "I've forgotten the number of Joel Cross' room."

The clerk said automatically: "Room 627, but I haven't seen Mr. Cross come in."

Shayne said: "He's expecting me, but maybe I'd better call him to be sure." He went to a house phone, lifted the receiver and said: "Room 627, please."

He waited a moment, listening to the phone ring, then said: "Joel? . . . Swell. I'll be right up." He hung up, thanked the clerk, and went to the elevator.

The sixth-floor corridor was deserted. Shayne examined the lock on the door and selected three keys from a well-filled ring. The second key opened the door. He stepped in and closed it behind him. The shades were drawn, darkening the room. He switched on the lights and stood very still while his gaze went around the disordered room.

Bureau drawers had been pulled open and dumped on the floor. The mattress was turned back, disclosing bare springs. The typewriter-desk drawers were open and copy paper scattered on the floor.

Shayne went over and started to paw through the papers. He heard a faint click, and turned to see Joel Cross standing on the threshold. The reporter's mustache bristled, his upper lip drawn back to show his teeth. He took a .32 automatic from his pocket and held it carelessly at his side, the blued muzzle pointing at Shayne.

Cross said: "Stand right where you are while I use the telephone."



HAYNE grinned and made a wide gesture around the room. "You think I did this?"

"I'll let the police ask the questions." Cross was sidling across to the telephone.

"I got here about a minute before you did. You know that," Shayne expostulated. "You saw me leave Henri's not more than five minutes ago. How in hell do you think I managed all this in that time?"

"It's been more than five minutes." Cross' voice was cold. He reached for the phone with his left hand.

"Don't be a damned fool!" Shayne said impatiently. "You don't want the police in on this."

"You're the one who doesn't want the police. I've got you for feloniously entering my room, if nothing else."

"I didn't break in. I pushed the door open and walked in. Check with the desk clerk," he urged. "I called your room from downstairs not more than two minutes ago. Someone answered and I assumed it was you. I came up and found the door ajar. The clerk's story will just make a fool of you with the police."

Cross lifted the receiver and said: "Desk clerk." He waited a moment, then said: "This is Mr. Cross. A moment ago when I came in you told me someone had just come up to my room. Did he ask for me at the desk?"

He listened for a while, nodding slowly and frowning. He said, "I see," and hung up. He put the pistol back in his pocket. "I guess you're right, Shayne. The clerk did hear you talking to somebody in my room." He sat down on the bed and asked: "Who was it?"

Shayne shook his head. "Whoever it was ducked out before I could get up in the elevator. Is the diary gone?"

"So that's what you were after?" Cross' face was pale with anger.

"Where was it?" Shayne asked impatiently. "If it's been stolen—"

"You'd better come clean with me, Shayne. What's this talk about Groat disappearing and maybe being dead? What are you and Jake Sims up to?"

Shayne looked around the room morosely. He said, "I don't think it matters now," and started toward the door.

Cross jumped up, bunching his right hand in his coat pocket. "You're not leaving here until you do some talking."

Shayne kept on going. He didn't look at Cross. He went out the door and down the hall to the elevator, pushed the button and waited, keeping his back obstinately toward Cross' door.

The elevator stopped and took him down to the lobby. He went out and walked back to his office.

Lucy was waiting impatiently to go out for lunch. "I've been waiting for hours," she complained. "You've got company." She indicated the closed door of his office.

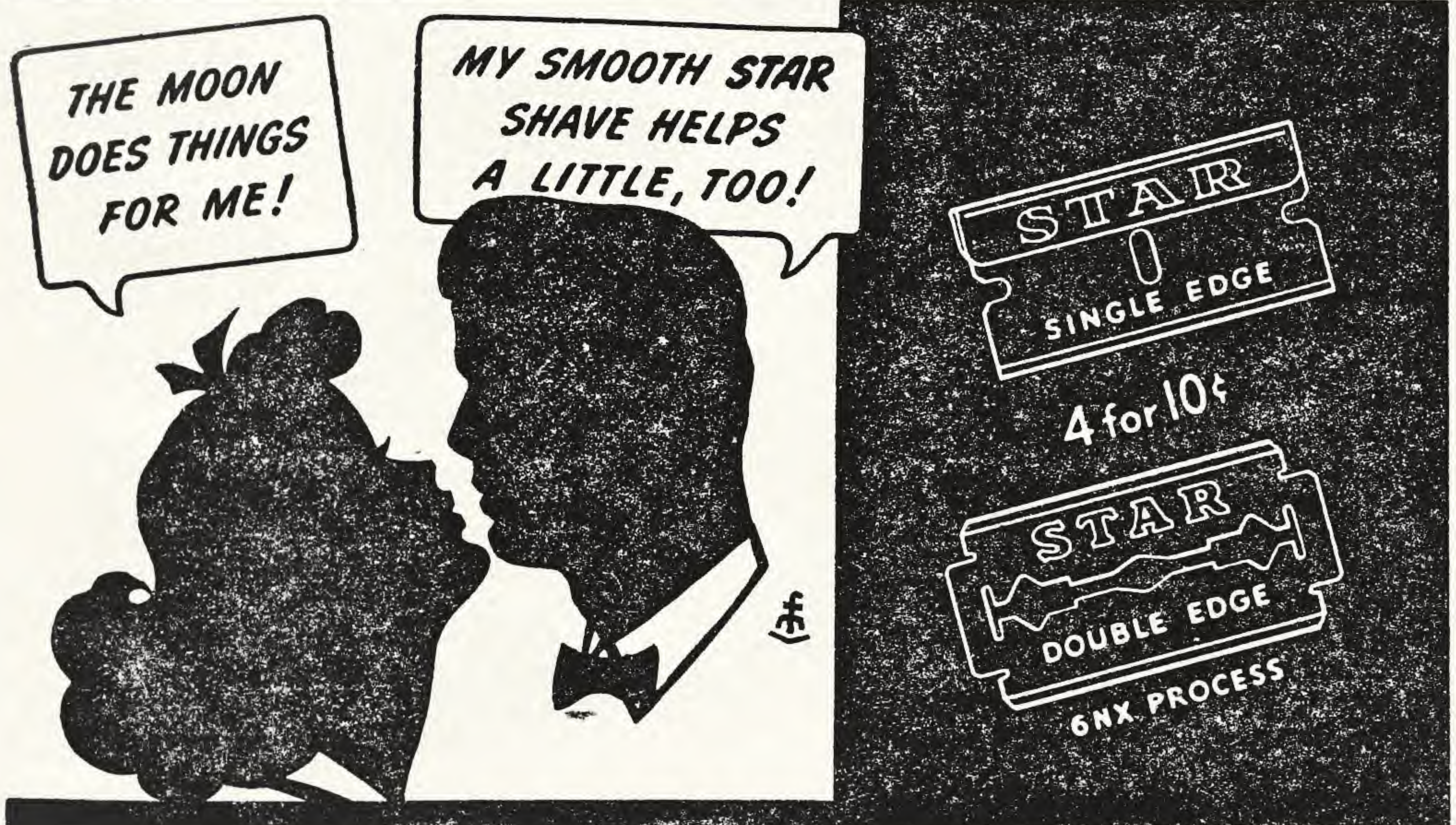
Shayne said, "Run along now," and opened his office door. Jake Sims was standing at the window with his hands clasped behind him. The young woman whom he had seen in Hastings' office was sitting beside his desk. She looked up at him coolly, a cigarette in her left hand, her lips parted to let smoke flow out. He had that same impression of hard, alert intelligence, as when he had first seen her.

Sims said: "Glad to see you, Shayne. This is Mrs. Meredith."

"I'm very glad to meet you, Mrs. Meredith," said Shayne, and sat down in his swivel chair.

Sims moved from the window and took a chair opposite Shayne. He said: "Mrs. Meredith is a client of mine from out of town."

Shayne looked at her and didn't say anything. She had her legs crossed and she smiled faintly. Her eyes were brown and calculating. She met Shayne's gaze levelly, sizing him up as he imagined she did all men—to ascertain if



she might use him and how best to handle him.

"I wondered," said Jake Sims, "what sort of job you're doing for Hastings."

SHAYNE was still watching Mrs. Meredith. She made a quick gesture with her left hand, as though she had come to a sudden decision.

"Where have you hidden Jasper Groat?" Her voice was strong and even, without impatience.

"You must be Albert Hawley's divorced wife," Shayne countered.

She nodded and leaned forward to stub out her cigarette in a tray on his desk.

"What makes you think I've hidden Groat?"

Jake Sims cleared his throat. "It's fairly evident, Shayne. You're working with Hastings to defraud my client out of a fortune. You've got rid of the only witness who could testify that Hawley didn't die until after his uncle passed on—until after he had legally inherited Ezra Hawley's fortune."

"The only witness?" Shayne asked mockingly.

"You know Cunningham either can't or won't make a definite statement," Mrs. Meredith said. "He told us about talking with you last night. He's convinced you know what's happened to Jasper Groat."

"But not the diary," Shayne said gently.

"He thinks you're working with the reporter who got the diary from Groat," Sims put in.

"But *you* don't"—Shayne swung about to face Sims—"else you wouldn't have called Joel Cross to learn whether he had authority to publish the diary in the event of Groat's death."

"We know, of course, that you're working for Mrs. Hawley," Mrs. Meredith said coldly. "It doesn't matter when or how you got hold of the diary. We want it—or assurance that it'll be destroyed."

"As soon as Cunningham is convinced it won't turn up to prove him a liar, his memory will improve and he'll know whether Albert Hawley lived four or five days in the life-boat."

"You can be sure the diary won't do the Hawleys any good as evidence, even though it does seem to prove their point. If they introduce it in court, we'll counter with Cunningham."

"I don't think he'll testify until he's sure the diary won't pop up to prove him a liar," Shayne said.

Sims scowled. "It'd be much better that way," he agreed. "That's why my client is willing to pay good money for it."

"Were you in New Orleans when your ex-husband was inducted into the army?" Shayne asked her suddenly.

"I was in Reno getting my divorce."

"But you were living here just prior to that?" he pressed her.

"Until I went to Reno, yes."

"Did you know Leon Wallace?"

For the first time her superb equanimity was disturbed. She took time to get a cigarette out of her purse. Her hands trembled as she lit it. "The name sounds familiar," she admitted.

"Was he the gardener at Hawleys while you were there?"

"Perhaps. I'm sure I don't know."

"What's this Wallace got to do with the present situation?" Sims demanded. "We've made you an open-and-shut offer, Shayne."

"Leon Wallace has a lot to do with all this," Shayne said slowly and emphatically. His eyes were very bright.

Mrs. Meredith came up from her chair, clutching her bag with both hands and giving Shayne a provocative look. "Perhaps we can talk about this further—privately." Her slight hesitation before the last word was just enough to indicate she didn't wish to discuss Leon Wallace before her attorney.

Shayne got up and said: "I'm at your service."

"Suppose, then, I call you after you've had time to think things over." She walked toward the door.

Sims hesitated, his loose lips drawn tight, scowling his dissatisfaction at the turn the interview had taken. He nodded to Shayne and followed his client out.

Shayne's phone rang. Inspector Quinlan in charge of the homicide department was on the wire. He said: "Shayne. I've got a stiff over here who used to be named Groat."

"Where did you get him?"

"Fished out of the river half a mile below the point where Labarre Street hits the levee. Bopped over the head about eighteen hours ago."

"Any papers on him? A diary or anything like that?"

"Nothing at all. Sergeant Pepper says you've got some dope on him, and I just finished talking to Mrs. Groat. You'd better come over to my office and give out."

Shayne said: "Right away." He hung up and gently massaged his left earlobe for a moment before grabbing his hat.

CHAPTER FIVE

Wine, Women and Death—



AND THAT'S all I know about it," Shayne completed his recital half an hour later in Quinlan's office, spreading out his big hands in an open gesture. He had told Quinlan everything he knew about Jasper Groat, withholding only the details of his private talk with Leslie Cunning-

ham and the information Mrs. Leon Wallace had given him.

Quinlan had a high forehead and thin features, with frosty blue eyes. He was intelligent and hard-boiled, and he liked Shayne. He leaned back in his chair and fiddled with a pencil. "It looks as though Groat went out to the Hawley house at eight, was met there by someone who conked him and carried his body down to the river. Why, Mike? And who?"

Shayne said: "You know as much about it as I do."

"The way you tell it," summarized the inspector, "no one knew the diary was going to be important in determining the exact time of Albert Hawley's death until Ezra Hawley's will was read to the family this morning."

"That's the way it looks. Except Hastings, of course—the family lawyer. He probably knew the will was drawn up in such a way that the ex-Mrs. Albert Hawley would receive the inheritance *only* if it could be proved that Albert outlived his uncle."

"Why did the Hawleys act the way they did about not seeing Groat?" demanded the inspector irritably. "You'd think they'd want to talk with the men who were with Albert when he died."

"You'll have to ask Mrs. Sarah Hawley. She's a tough old dame. I gather that she blames them for saving their own lives while her son died."

"Who's this Mrs. Leon Wallace from Littleboro who showed up at Groat's apartment this morning?"

"Her husband has been missing for two years," Shayne said slowly. "He was employed as the Hawley's gardener at the time. It seems that Groat telephoned Mrs. Wallace yesterday afternoon saying he had information about her missing husband, and asked her to come in to see him."

"Information he must have got from Albert Hawley while the boy was dying."

"That's a good guess," Shayne agreed.

"Then *that* may be the motive behind Groat's death. To prevent him from turning that information over to Mrs. Wallace. Do you think there was some dirty work involving the Hawleys?"

"I—don't know." Shayne hesitated. "Let's not forget the newspaper reporter, Joel Cross. He had all day yesterday in which to read Groat's diary. He's smart. If it contained material for blackmailing the Hawley's, he'd realize at once that Groat's religious scruples would prevent such usage of the diary. With Groat out of the way, the coast would be clear."

"But he plans to publish the damned thing," groaned Quinlan. "That doesn't sound like blackmail. Stuff like that remains valuable only as long as it remains secret."

"Sure. He prints a big item in the paper announcing publication of the diary. That's to put the screws on. Remember, he has sole possession of the diary and he's the one who will decide what is printed and what is withheld. That makes it a perfect blackmail setup for him—with Groat out of the way."

"What about this fellow Cunningham? He must know what's in the diary, too."

Shayne shook his head. "I'm not too sure about that. Remember, it was Groat who nursed Hawley in the lifeboat. I imagine Cunningham suspects the truth, though he may not know it all. Anyhow, he'd play ball with Cross for a split."

"It's too damned balled up," Quinlan snorted. "We're guessing at everything. We don't even know whether the entry in the diary will throw Ezra Hawley's money to the family or to Albert's ex-wife."

"That's right," Shayne agreed. "We don't know anything for sure. We don't even know who has the diary now."

"Groat's murderer."

"Only if Groat had it on him when he was killed. We don't know whether he ever got it back from Cross or not. If he did, he may have given it to someone or hidden it before he started to keep his eight o'clock appointment last night." Shayne got up with a wide grin. "Should you talk to Joel Cross, don't pay any attention if he accuses me of stealing the diary from his room. I didn't, but someone else may have." Shayne sauntered out with an infuriating wave of his hand.

LUCY was at her desk when he got back to his office. She looked up with a sardonic glint in her brown eyes and consulted a memo pad.

"Two women called," she told him primly. "One of them wants you to call her and the other wanted your home address."

"Who were the ladies?"

"I didn't say either of them were ladies. One was a Mrs. Meredith. She's at the St. Charles. Room 319. She's the one who wants you to call her. The other one wouldn't give her name. She giggles," Lucy ended insinuatingly.

"Does she also nibble on her finger?"

"I wouldn't be at all surprised. She sounded," Lucy went on disdainfully, "like a mentally retarded man-crazy she wolf."

Shayne nodded gravely. "You're developing quite a knack for character analysis over the telephone. I suppose you gave this charming maiden the information she wanted?"

"I gave her the address of your apartment. You told me once I was never to refuse it to a female inquirer."

Shayne said: "That's swell. My liquor supply won't be safe from now on. You can take the

rest of the afternoon off," he went on abruptly. "I think Mrs. Groat could use some company. They pulled her husband out of the river a short time ago."

"Oh, Michael! Dead?"

"Since last night around eight."

"Who did it? Has it anything to do with Mrs. Wallace who was to have seen him this morning?"

He nodded soberly. "I wouldn't be surprised. Sort of keep an eye on her, angel. She may be in danger as long as her husband's diary is missing. If the killer didn't get it off Groat last night, he's still after it."

"Why is the diary so important, Michael?"

"I'm not just sure yet. Run along home and comfort Mrs. Groat. And if Leslie Cunningham should drop in with his consolations, comfort him, too—but in an impersonal sort of way." He patted Lucy on the hand and went on into his private office where he called the St. Charles Hotel and asked for Room 319.

He heard the telephone buzz twice before Mrs. Meredith answered it.

He said: "This is Mike Shayne."

"Have you had time to think things over, Mr. Shayne?"

"Enough to give me a headache," he growled.

"You poor man." Her voice was lightly mocking. "Perhaps a drink would help."

"It's an idea."

"I'll be happy to fix you a special receipt all my own if you'd like to come over."

Shayne said, "In ten minutes," and hung up.

MRS. MEREDITH was waiting for Shayne in the living room of her two-room suite. She was wearing a clinging hostess gown of gray satin, and her brown hair, quite obviously brightened with a reddish hair-tint, was up-swept. The gown and the

hair-do gave her height and dignity. She put her hand in his and drew him into the room.

Shayne's gray eyes held an odd look. She tilted her head and asked: "Why are you looking at me like that?"

"I've decided to be afraid of you," Shayne told her bluntly.

She gave his hand an extra pressure and released it. "I like that. It's every woman's secret desire to be dangerously alluring."

"You're intelligent along with it," he told her. "I should get out of here while I can."

"But you're not going to."

"You know I'm not." He prowled across the room to a low table in front of the divan. It held an ice bucket, a bottle of bonded bourbon, a small bowl with a teaspoon, two tall glasses full of shaved ice, and a squatty vase holding a bouquet of mint sprigs. Green mint

leaves floated in the bowl on top of a syrupy mixture of granulated sugar dissolved in a small quantity of bourbon.

She came over and sat down on the divan. "This is the headache medicine I mentioned." She poured half the mixture into each glass of shaved ice, tilted the whiskey bottle and filled the glasses to the brim with straight bourbon. She looked up and smiled at the mild amazement on Shayne's angular face. "That's the secret of a true New Orleans mint julep."

"You didn't spare the horses when you poured those," he said.

"But wait." She decorated each glass with mint sprigs from the vase, then held out a glass to him.

Shayne moved over to a deep chair, sank into it, stretched his long legs out comfortably, and buried his nose in the mint. He took a long, slow drink. "This," he said, "is the only civilized way to drink whiskey. You are a charming hostess."

"Thank you," she said simply, as though accepting his statement not as flattery but as one with which she agreed.

"I'm beginning to understand how you induced your ex-husband to make a new will leaving everything to you after you had divorced him. That's one of the angles that's bothered me. It just didn't make sense."

She said: "Oh? And it does make sense now?"

"It's beginning to. You had Hawley wrapped around your little finger, didn't you?"

"Albert loved me," she said softly.

Shayne took a sip from his glass. "What about Leon Wallace?"

"What do you know about him?" she countered.

"I know he went to work as a gardener on the Hawley estate about the time you decided to go to Reno and divorce your husband." He looked steadily at her as he spoke. "And I know he disappeared soon afterward, placating his wife and children with a payment of ten thousand dollars. He has continued to send them a thousand dollars every six months—in envelopes mailed from New Orleans."

Mrs. Meredith met his eyes levelly, an interested expression on her face. She said: "You do get around, don't you, Mr. Shayne?"

"I also imagine that Albert Hawley knew the secret of Wallace's disappearance and told it to Groat when he was dying in the life-boat," Shayne continued relentlessly. "Groat was an honorable man and the secret weighed on his conscience until he phoned Mrs. Wallace to come and see him. I'm inclined to believe," he went on slowly, "that Jasper Groat was murdered last night to prevent that meeting from taking place."

"Murdered!"

"His body was pulled out of the river a couple of hours ago."

"Was his diary found?" she asked sharply.

"That's damned important to you, isn't it?"

She said impatiently: "You know what the exact date of Albert's death means to me."

"But who knew how important it was last night?"

Her face was blank for a moment. Then her eyes brightened and she nodded her head slowly. "I see now why you think his death had some connection with Leon Wallace rather than with the estate. Uncle Ezra's will supposedly hadn't been read when Groat was killed."

He said: "That's the way it was told to me."

She was silently thoughtful, then said harshly: "Perhaps Groat got in your way, Mr. Shayne. You're working for Cunningham, aren't you? You look like someone who'd kill a man if he got in your way."

Shayne grinned and rubbed his jaw. "I haven't picked my client yet. I'm still shopping around for the best offer."

"I think I'd like to be your client."

"What's your offer?"

She moved restively under his hard gaze. "In dollars and cents?"

"I'm not interested in anything else."

"After I collect Ezra Hawley's money I'll be able to pay any fee you want."

"For what?" he demanded.

"Helping me to collect it—seeing to it that I collect," she amended.

"Is Mr. Meredith in town with you?"

She was obviously disturbed at the sudden question. "No."

"Where do you live?" Shayne probed.

"How can that possibly concern you?"

"What's your husband's business? What's his first name? When and where did you meet him? What sort of man is he?" The questions came swiftly and angrily.

She didn't answer. She sat up stiffly, reached for her drink, drank the last of it, and sucked at the shaved ice.

"There you are." Shayne spread out his big hands and scowled. "One man has been murdered. If I stick my neck out, I'm going to know what I'm sticking it into."

Mrs. Meredith lit a cigarette. She asked: "What have my private affairs to do with your sticking your neck out?"

"I don't know yet. But I can't help thinking about Leon Wallace deserting his wife and children mysteriously—at the same time you dashed off to Reno for a divorce."

She said: "My husband's name is Meredith, not Wallace, Mr. Shayne. His first name is Theodore, not Leon. And I assure you he isn't a gardener. I went to Chicago immediately after my divorce was granted. I met Theodore there. Does that satisfy you?"

"No," Shayne said with blunt impatience.

"Men have disappeared and changed their

names before this—and married under the assumed names."

"Really, though!" She stiffened again and said: "A gardener!" Her voice was harsh with indignation.

"I didn't know Wallace," Shayne growled. "Maybe he was a graduate horticulturist. Maybe he had a lot of sex appeal. Women have fallen in love with gardeners before this."

"And I suppose you think I furnished the money he sent his wife to keep her quiet? Or maybe you think Albert sent it, so I could run off with the gardener?" Her tone was mocking.

"There's something screwy about what happened two years ago—Wallace disappearing, you divorcing Albert, Albert willing everything to you afterwards, Albert being inducted into the army. I don't know what it is, but by God I'm going to find out!"

SHAYNE hunched forward and glared at the toe of his big shoe.

"Why keep harping on that when there's a million-dollar estate waiting to be settled?" she asked calmly.

Shayne asked abruptly: "When did you first talk with Cunningham?"

After a slight hesitation she said: "This morning, shortly before lunch. After Mr. Sims and I heard the terms of the will from Hastings."

"Did you discuss the Wallace affair with him?"

"Certainly not." Her voice was taut and angry. "Can't I convince you that I'm not interested in Wallace?"

"I am." Shayne finished his drink, got up and said: "Thanks for the drink."

"Let me fix you another one."

Shayne shook his head. "I'm hard to get along with when I get a pint of liquor in me."

"I could get along with you." She patted the divan. "Why are we wasting time? And you can call me Matie."

Shayne said: "Because I've got to keep a date with a dame. She's waiting in my apartment right now and I need to be sober to handle her." He wagged his head and closed one eye in a wink. "It happens to be your ex-sister-in-law!"

"Not Beatrice!" she gasped. Her upper lip curled in contempt.

"That's right. We had quite a talk this morning. I suppose you know it was she who invited Groat out to the Hawleys to be murdered last night."

"Did she murder him?"

"I don't know. If I can keep her sober long enough, I've an idea she can tell me who did."

"We haven't settled anything," Mrs. Meredith reminded him. "I don't think I understand you, Mr. Shayne."

Shayne was at the door and had hold of the knob when someone rapped. He turned to look at Mrs. Meredith, one eyebrow quizzically raised. She had half-risen from the divan and her eyes were wide. She shook her head at Shayne but didn't speak.

The rapping sounded again. Shayne turned the knob and opened the door. He said, "Well, well," and stepped back when he saw Leslie Cunningham standing on the threshold.

The sailor wore a double-breasted suit of blue serge, the snap-brim of a felt hat was pulled low over his bronzed forehead. His black eyes glittered with surprise when he saw Shayne. He jerked his gaze to Mrs. Meredith and muttered: "I didn't know you two knew each other."

Shayne said: "I get around a little." He motioned Cunningham inside and added: "Mrs. Meredith is looking for another victim to drink one of her mint juleps. I have to leave to keep an appointment."

Cunningham squared his shoulders and stepped into the room. His actions showed a strong trace of self-consciousness. His gaze was fixed on Mrs. Meredith's face as though he hoped to receive some signal from her, some hint as to what she expected from him.

She said smoothly: "It's nice of you to drop in, Mr. Cunningham. I *would* like to mix you a mint julep since Mr. Shayne scorns them. Besides, my charming ex-sister-in-law is waiting in his apartment," she added acidly.

Shayne said: "I'm sure you two have a lot to talk over." He started for the door again, adding: "Just as I have with Mrs. Meany."

"I've got some things to talk to you about," Cunningham muttered. "I just heard Jasper Groat's body has been found."

"Didn't surprise you, did it?"

"No. As I told you last night, I knew something had happened to him. What about the diary?"

"You still have that to worry about. You and Mrs. Meredith and the Hawleys, and Hastings and Sims—and maybe Joel Cross." Shayne went out and closed the door.

In the lobby he went down the corridor behind the desk and stopped at a door marked PRIVATE. A voice said, "Come in," when he knocked.

Kurt Davis was lounging in a chair smoking a cigar. He didn't look the way a house detective is supposed to look, but at the St. Charles the job called for brains more than brawn.

He said: "Hello there, Shayne. Are you working?"

"Sort of." Shayne pulled up a chair and sat down. "Can you get me the home address of Mrs. Meredith in Room 319?"

"I can get you the address she used when she registered."

Shayne nodded. "I don't expect an affidavit with it."

Davis got up and strolled across the small room to a metal box affixed to the wall. He pressed a button and spoke into the box. Turning back to Shayne, he asked: "Anything we ought to have on her?"

"I don't think so." Shayne hesitated, then added: "You might keep an eye on the men she entertains in her suite."

"A floozie?" the house detective asked.

"Not at all. The worst she's likely to do is knock some guy out with one of her mint juleps. She's mixed up in a case I'm working on. I don't know how deeply. If there's a pinch I'll see that your dump is kept clean."

The metal box buzzed. Davis turned to it, pressed a button and said: "Yes?"

Shayne took out a small memo pad and a pencil. He copied down the street address as Davis repeated it aloud. He promised, "If I get anything you can use, I'll pass it on," and went out.

It was getting quite dark as he walked up the street to a telegraph office and wrote out a message to Mr. Theodore Meredith in Chicago, Illinois. It read:

DANGEROUS COMPLICATIONS DEMAND YOU HERE IMMEDIATELY. WIRE ME AT ONCE BUT NOT AT HOTEL BECAUSE AM WATCHED. SEND MESSAGE TO THIS ADDRESS.

He completed the message with his own apartment address and signed it "Matie." He sent it as a straight message, went back to his parked car and drove to his apartment.

When Shayne stepped out on the sidewalk he glanced up to see light in the front windows of his second-floor apartment. He knew he hadn't left the lights on when he went out earlier in the day.

He thought he discerned movement inside the room, and watched the windows for a full minute. The movement was not repeated. He grinned wryly upon realizing that he might have been telling Mrs. Meredith the truth, after all, when he had said lightly that Beatrice Meany was waiting for him in his apartment. He started forward, hoping she hadn't already got into his liquor. There were a lot of things he wanted to ask her.

He went up the front steps onto the veranda, passed through double entrance doors into a small dim-lit hallway with stairs leading directly upward. The small light bulb at the top of the stairway was out, leaving the upper hall in darkness. He turned toward the crack of light showing under his door.

As he brought his keys from his pocket his hand grasped the doorknob. It turned easily and the door swung open.

The crumpled body of Beatrice Meany lay in the middle of the brightly-lighted room.

CHAPTER SIX

Dipso Stiff



HAYNE stood in the doorway taking in every detail of the scene. Beatrice was dead. Her eyes were open and glazed, her tongue protruded slightly from her lips and was turning bluish, her head was twisted in a manner indicating a broken

neck.

Shayne whirled from the doorway and lunged down the hall. He halted briefly at the head of the stairs, reached up to touch the unlit light globe. The bulb was warm. He twisted it in, carefully touching it with two fingers near the neck of the globe. Light flooded the hallway.

He strode on to a narrow rear stairway, went swiftly down to the rear of the lower hall and found the back door opening onto the alley standing ajar. He stepped out and looked up and down the alley, but saw no one.

Back in the entrance hall he put a nickel in the wall telephone and called police headquarters. "This is Mike Shayne, and I've got a corpse for you." He gave the address and hung up, turned and went to a door marked JANITOR, opposite the stairway.

He opened the door and called: "Jake."

A voice said, "Yassuh," and in a moment a wrinkled Negro came to the door. "What yo' want, Mist' Shayne?"

"Do you know how a woman got in my apartment?"

"Yo' sistuh? Yassah. Ah let her in, Mist' Shayne. She said 'twas a s'prise like."

"What time did you let her in?"

"'Bout a hour ago, Ah reckon." Jake scratched his kinky head. "Jest after sundown. Ah was rakin' the front yahd an' she druv up

in a taxi an' asks me was yo' heah an' then could Ah unlock yo' door so's she could wait."

"Have you seen any strangers around here since you let her in?"

"Strangers? Sho now . . ." He scratched his head again, then said: "Ah reckon yo' mean that gennnleman what come li'l while later. He asks has a gal come heah to see yo' an' Ah tells him 'bout yo' sistuh waitin'. He jest snorts an' goes up."

"How long did he stay?" Shayne asked sharply.

"Ah don' rightly know. Did'n' see 'im leave, Ah reckon. Ah got busy an' did'n' take no notice. Is suthin' wrong?"

"The girl is dead," Shayne said curtly.

He heard car doors slam outside and hurried to the front door to admit Inspector Quinlan and members of the homicide squad.

The inspector barked: "So it's you, Shayne. The sergeant did get the right name. Where's the body?"

"Upstairs in my apartment." Shayne led the way upstairs to his open apartment door. "In here," he said. "I touched the outside knob opening the door, but didn't go inside."

Quinlan nodded to his men to get to work, stepped back beside Shayne and asked: "Who is she?"

"Beatrice Meany, daughter of Mrs. Sarah Hawley. Lived out at the Hawley place with her husband and her mother."

"Mixed up in the Groat case," Quinlan said.

"She's the girl who told me she'd asked Groat to come out last night, but denied seeing him arrive."

"What's she doing here?"

"Your guess is as good as mine." Shayne's eyes brooded over the room. "She was too drunk to talk very straight when I was out at the Hawley house."

"So you invited her here to finish the interview?"

"She invited herself." Shayne told him about Beatrice's phone call to his office to get the address of his apartment. "That's all I know

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3 Refined LANOLIN is a soothing oil that closely resembles the oil of the human skin. Get Wildroot Cream-Oil from your barber or drug counter.

about it," he ended bitterly. "She came here about an hour ago, evidently, and passed herself off as my sister in order to get in. A man came asking for me a little later.

"Jake told him I wasn't in and only my sister was here, but he came up anyway. Jake didn't see him leave."

"Did the janitor give a description of him?"

"He hadn't got that far when you arrived. Here's one thing more, Inspector." Shayne showed him the light bulb at the head of the stairs. "That was unscrewed and the hall was dark when I came up. It was still warm when I screwed it in. I was careful not to touch it except right at the neck with two fingers."

"All right," Quinlan grunted. "I'll have it checked. Let's talk to the janitor."

JAKE was waiting for them at the foot of the stairs. He repeated the story he had told Shayne, for the inspector's benefit.

When asked for a description, the Negro said: "He was sorta fat, an' sorta young. He had on a gray suit, Ah reckon, sorta dark."

"Was he wearing a hat?" Shayne asked.

"A hat? Yassuh. Ah reckon so. Ah jest don' recollect."

"The description sounds like Mr. Meany," Shayne told Quinlan. "The girl's husband. He's quite bald for so young a man, and you notice it if you see him bareheaded."

Quinlan went to the telephone and talked to Headquarters. He dispatched men to the Hawley residence to pick up Gerald Meany and learn what they could about his movements that afternoon, hung up and turned back to Shayne. "I suppose Jake saw you come in just now?"

"No one saw me come in," he answered cheerfully.

"Can you prove she was dead when you got here?"

Shayne frowned and admitted: "Depends on how long she's been dead. I can account for my actions to within about fifteen minutes of the time I called Headquarters."

Quinlan got out his notebook and said: "Let's have it."

"I went to Room 319 at the St. Charles Hotel about an hour ago. Took about half an hour drinking a mint julep. Dropped in on the house dick for a chat on my way out, fooled around a few minutes and drove straight back here."

Quinlan went to the phone and called the St. Charles. He asked for the house detective, and after talking for a few minutes hung up.

Shayne said: "Call Room 319 now, and see if there are still two people in the room where I left them. Mrs. Meredith will probably answer. You ask for Leslie Cunningham."

When the connection was made, Inspector Quinlan said: "Mrs. Meredith? I'd like to

speaking to Mr. Cunningham." When the sailor got on the line, the inspector questioned him, jotting down the answers in his notebook. Presently he hung up and turned to Shayne.

"Davis and Cunningham check your story. Davis says you were there at seventeen minutes after six. Your report on the murder reached Headquarters at exactly six thirty-nine. That's twenty-two minutes to account for from the time you left Davis, and it's not more than a five-minute drive here. How much time did you waste after you got here before calling in?"

"Not more than five minutes," Shayne told him.

"Don't you know enough to report a murder as soon as you see it?"

"I thought I saw movement in my room when I got out of my car," Shayne explained, "and watched the window for a while. When I found the dead woman, I thought the murderer might be just then getting out the back way, and I checked. Then I took time to turn on the hall light."

"That puts you here at six-thirty-four. It didn't take you seventeen minutes to drive here from the St. Charles."

"How does Kurt Davis place the time so exactly?"

"Claims he looked at his watch. It's a habit of his."

Shayne grinned wryly. "I suppose you wouldn't believe me if I told you I went window shopping for twelve minutes."

Quinlan's face reddened. He barked: "Window shopping!"

"Let's go up and see what the boys have got," Shayne suggested. "Maybe I'll think of something better than window shopping."

Doctor Matson's assistant met them in the doorway of Shayne's apartment. He said: "Death due to strangulation and possible fracture of the vertebrae. Not more than half an hour ago, and probably within the past fifteen minutes. The doc will have to give it to you closer than that."

Shayne asked: "Could she have been strangled by a woman?"

The young assistant considered for a moment, then said: "It's very doubtful. The contusions on her throat indicate a lot of strength in the hands that caused them." He went on down the hall.

Shayne and Quinlan went inside the room where the photographer was putting away his equipment and the fingerprint men were finishing up their work.

Sergeant Donovan scowled at Quinlan. He said: "We haven't got anything worthwhile. One set of prints everywhere, presumably yours, Mike. Her prints are on that brandy bottle on the table and on the arms of that chair behind her."

"How fresh are any of my prints? The in-

spector is trying to hang the murder on me."

Donovan looked apologetically at Quinlan and said: "We haven't found a print of yours made later than noon, say."

"How about the light bulb in the hallway?"

"Yours are plain enough at the top. Partial imprints on the bottom and sides," Donovan said disgustedly.

"Try the back stairway and door for prints," Shayne said to Donovan.

"You can call it quits if you don't find anything worth reporting," Quinlan said. He went over and sat down wearily on the sofa.

Shayne stood looking at the dead woman. Beatrice Meany did not look like a dipsomaniac as she lay there. Her naturally childish features had taken on a sort of dignity in death. There was a troubled expression on her face, as though she didn't understand why this had happened to her.



TWO men came up the stairs with a long wicker basket. They placed the body in the basket and took it away.

Shayne picked up the brandy bottle and squinted at it. "She'd helped herself to a couple of big slugs before she got it," he said to the inspector. "Want a shot?"

"No, thanks. Why did she come up to your apartment?"

"She wanted to keep Ezra Hawley's money away from her dead brother's ex-wife. I suppose she wanted me to help her."

"The woman in Room 319 at the St. Charles?" Quinlan asked, frowning deeply.

"That's right—Mrs. Meredith."

"I suppose *she* wants you to help *her* get the money."

"That's right."

"And Leslie Cunningham, Groat's companion in the lifeboat, was with Mrs. Meredith when I talked to them."

"That's right. Cunningham is the only one left now who can testify when Hawley died."

"Is he working with Mrs. Meredith?"

Shayne hesitated, then said: "My impression of Cunningham is that he's out for whatever he can get. Mrs. Meredith has quite a lot to offer, I'd say."

"And you think she's offering it to him?"

"She's hard-boiled and she's plenty smart. I don't think she'd stop at anything to get hold of a million dollars."

"What about Groat's diary?"

"That's still the stumbling block. The hell of it is," Shayne admitted irritably, "we don't know which side the diary favors—the Hawleys or Mrs. Meredith. Cunningham pretends he isn't sure whether Hawley lived four or five days. That may be the truth, or he may just

be waiting to make sure the diary is out of the way before he comes forward with definite testimony. Both parties are anxious to get hold of it to substantiate their claim or to suppress it if it *doesn't* substantiate their claim."

"Doesn't anyone actually know what's in the diary?"

"Cunningham may, but he's not saying. And Joel Cross should know, whether he realizes what it means or not."

Quinlan blinked at him. "Cross must know plenty or he wouldn't have advertised he was going to print the diary."

"Yeah." Shayne took a long drink from the brandy bottle. Cradling the bottle in his arm, his gray eyes brooded across the room. He sat down on the sofa beside Quinlan. "Cross could be playing a deep game," he mused. "What have you done about alibis for Groat's death?"

"Not much. I haven't checked yours, for instance."

Shayne grinned. "What time?"

"Matson puts the murder between eight and nine last night. If he's right—"

"Let's assume it's correct," Shayne suggested.

"He was murdered with the old familiar blunt instrument, and tossed in the river soon afterward," Quinlan said heavily.

"Any way of telling how soon?"

"I asked Matson that. He grumbled about expecting miracles from a mere man of science and then admitted there were indications that it was not more than ten or fifteen minutes later."

"Just about long enough to get from the Hawley house to the river."

Quinlan nodded unhappily. "I got exactly the same information you did, except the old woman said the girl was nuts and that her saying she talked to Groat and invited him out wasn't worth a damn as testimony. Which reminds me—" He went to the telephone.

There was a knock on the door. Shayne opened it. A girl in messenger uniform said: "Telegram for Mrs. Mer—"

Shayne said, "Sh-h," and shoved her into the hallway, closing the door behind him. "I'm Mr. Meredith. I'll sign." He fished out a half-dollar and put it in her hand, signed for the message and thrust it in his pocket.

Quinlan was just hanging up the receiver when Shayne returned. He asked: "Who was that?"

"Telegram for me."

Quinlan grunted and said: "Gerald Meany is missing—since a little before five. From what my men learned out there it looks as though he may have followed his wife over here."

"Followed her?"

"Here's the way they got it," Quinlan said. "Mrs. Meany called a taxi and left the house around four o'clock. Seems she had some

sort of an argument with her husband before she left, and a short time later he came down from her room with a scrap of paper and asked the Negro butler and Mrs. Hawley if either of them knew whose address it was.

"They both claimed they didn't know. The Negro did remember the street name, and told my men it was a number on Carondelet. It was on a sheet torn from the telephone pad in the Meanys' suite. The butler testified that Meany went out to his car and drove away immediately afterwards. He hasn't returned. I've got a pick-up out for him."

Shayne said: "It adds up to fit Jake's story. Funny—he didn't act like the jealous type."

"That does it," Quinlan said briskly. "He got sore about the way she carried on with you when you were out there. He brooded about it all day. When she came over here this afternoon it was too much for him. So he let her have it when he found her waiting here."

Shayne's gaunt face was expressionless. He said: "It sounds O.K., but he was crazy if he was jealous of his wife on my account." He grimaced at the memory of the few moments he had spent with her in her living room. Then he took the telegram from his pocket, opened it, and read:

YOU KNOW UTTERLY IMPOSSIBLE
FOR ME TO COME. CALL ME TONIGHT.
EXTREMELY ANXIOUS.
THEODORE.

Shayne crumpled the yellow sheet and tossed it aside carelessly. He asked pointedly: "Anything else you want with me?"

"Not until we pick up Meany and find whether he's got an alibi for this." Quinlan went out, reminding Shayne as he went to the door: "You're still got twelve minutes unaccounted for—and I don't believe you were window shopping."

SHAYNE jumped up and rummaged in the top drawer of a chest of drawers, returned to the sofa with a memorandum book which he hadn't used in many years. After taking a big drink from the brandy bottle, he settled himself and slowly turned the yellowed pages of the book.

Halfway through the memo pad he nodded with satisfaction. Holding the pages open with his thumb, he reached for the telephone and rang long-distance.

When the operator answered he said: "I want to place a person-to-person call to Chicago to Benjamin D. Ames, private detective, formerly associated with World Wide Detective Agency. He has a home in Chicago, I think. This is urgent police business. Please rush it." He gave his name and telephone number, hung up, took another drink, and settled back to wait.

He was staring into space and massaging his left earlobe when the phone rang. The operator said: "Ready on your call to Chicago, Mr. Shayne."

A reedy, nasal voice said: "Hello."

Shayne said: "Ben Ames? This is Mike Shayne in New Orleans." After a few brief explanations between them, Shayne said: "Here's a little job I need whipped up in a hurry. Got a few hours free and a pencil and paper to take this down?"

"Both," said Ben Ames. "Shoot."

"Theodore Meredith." Shayne gave him the street address. "I need a picture of him. He won't give you one, if my hunch is right, so you'd better take along a photog to steal one. But get it, Ben! And get all the dope about him you can pick up in a hurry. Here's your in to get at him: he's in the headlines in New Orleans as husband of the ex-wife of Albert Hawley, soldier recently lost at sea, and through Hawley, Meredith's wife is in line to inherit a million or so left to Hawley by his uncle, Ezra Hawley. A Chicago reporter could be interested in the story."

"Sure. I'll get to him, Mike. How fast, and how much do you want to lay on the line?"

"There's a plane leaving Chicago about midnight. Get the pic and anything else you can on that plane and you'll be a C-note richer."

"Can do," Ames assured him. "Air express to you in New Orleans?"

"Right." Shayne gave his address and hung up.

There was a gnawing sensation in his stomach. He recognized the sign. He took a drink of brandy as an antidote. He was beginning to move now. . . . The plane from Chicago was scheduled to arrive about nine in the morning. If his hunch was right. . . .

He heard a strong, authoritative knock on his door. He opened it, and Joel Cross blinked at him in surprise. Cross' bristly mustache and square jaw appeared more aggressive than ever.

Shayne said: "Come in and have a drink."

Cross walked swiftly into the room, darting suspicious glances everywhere. "Where is she?" he demanded.

"Who?"

Cross said: "Mrs. Meany." He sat on the edge of a chair and planted both hands on his knees.

Shayne sat down leisurely and asked: "What do you know about Mrs. Meany?"

"Very little. I know she's Mrs. Sarah Hawley's daughter."

"If you knew anything about her," Shayne said casually, "you'd look in the bedroom. She always goes to bed when she passes out."

"In there?" Cross looked quickly at a closed door on the left. He got up, said, "I think you're lying, Shayne," walked stiffly to the door

and opened it. He stood hesitantly on the threshold, then snapped on the light. He turned back to Shayne and said angrily: "What have you done with her?"

"What makes you think she's been here?" Shayne countered.

"She told me she was coming and asked me to meet her here."

"What for?"

"Something about the Groat diary. She seemed quite upset over the telephone."

"When?"

"Around four-thirty. See here, Shayne, if she isn't here—if this was just a trick to get me over here . . ."

Shayne slowly came to his feet. He was between Cross and the outer door. "I'll take the diary for her."

"I don't have it with me." There was a trace of a smirk in Cross' voice. "I'm not admitting that it's in my possession."

Shayne remained standing. He said: "It's almost seven o'clock. What took you so long to get here?"

"I didn't come here to be cross-questioned, by you."

"You're going to be." Shayne's voice was inflexible. He moved backward to the door, leaned against it, and folded his arms. "Two hours and a half, Cross. Did you think she'd wait for you all night?"

"I was busy and didn't realize how much time had passed. Are you going to tell me where she is?"

"In the morgue." Shayne's eyes gleamed fiercely.

Joel Cross' face went lax for a second. He stared at the detective and repeated: "In the morgue?"

"Sit down. It's time you and I did some talking." Shayne waited until Cross sat down before going to the couch. He asked harshly: "Where were you this evening between five-thirty and six?"

"In my room working. Good heavens, do you think I killed her? I didn't even know the girl."

"You knew she was coming here to see me."

"Do you mean she was killed *here*?"

"In that chair you're sitting on."

Cross jumped involuntarily, stared at the floor, wet his lips and said: "Suppose I did know she was coming here?"

"Maybe you were afraid she was getting ready to spill what she knew about Jasper Groat's murder," Shayne mused. "You fit. You had a motive for killing Groat before he reached the Hawleys and told his story. You'd read the diary and knew the value of the entries concerning Albert Hawley's death. And whoever killed Groat also killed Beatrice Meany this afternoon. You had the opportunity. She practically invited you over to kill her."



ROSS' sandy mustache no longer bristled. His voice was shaky when he said: "I didn't. I was working, I tell you. I've never been in this room before."

Shayne shrugged. "I can place you here between five-thirty and six," he warned.

"The Negro janitor let a man in while Mrs. Meany was waiting for me. You fit the description all right. Of course," he went on pleasantly, "the old man's eyesight isn't very good and he might not be too positive about making an identification unless I tell him what to say."

"Are you threatening to frame me for murder?" Cross snapped.

"I'm not sure it would be a frame. Personally, I don't like you. Inspector Quinlan is checking your alibi for last night. If you haven't a better one than your story about this afternoon—and if I have a little talk with the janitor . . ."

"Damn you," said Cross passionately, "you can't get away with anything like that. I still don't know what all this interest in the diary is about."

"You admit you read it yesterday."

"Sure I read it. But I still don't understand why people are being killed on account of it."

"You'd have a hell of a time convincing a jury of that," Shayne snarled. "It's right there in black and white, isn't it?"

"I studied it this afternoon after the girl called—"

"Then you admit you've got it."

Cross smiled unpleasantly. "In a *very* safe place."

"You know what the diary says about Leon Wallace, don't you?"

"I don't recall any such person," Cross returned. He was becoming stiff and aggressive again.

Shayne groaned and took another drink. Maybe he was all wet. Maybe he didn't know a damned thing about anything. Maybe he wasn't all wet, by God! Maybe Cross was doing a slick job of lying.

Shayne said harshly: "Are you willing to back up what you say by letting me read the diary?"

"No. I'm not interested in whether you believe me or not. Why should I prove anything to you?"

"To keep yourself out of a murder frame." His face was taut and grim. He got up and went to the wall speaking tube, lifted it and said: "Jake—this is Shayne. Come up here at once."

"Yassuh, Mist' Shayne. Ah be right up."

Shayne whirled to face Cross. "Men have burned on less evidence than I can produce against you." He sat down again. "Get smart, Cross. The inspector is looking for a murderer who answers your general description. If Jake

decides you're the man, all hell won't change his identification."

Cross fidgeted in his chair. "This is preposterous," he burst out.

Jake knocked timidly on the door. Shayne stayed in front of him so that he couldn't see Cross. He said: "You let a man into my room this afternoon, Jake, and a girl was murdered. If you identify this man now, the police won't do anything to you for letting him in."

"You're coaching him," shouted Cross. "You're telling him to say it was me."

Jake rolled his eyes at Cross when Shayne stepped aside. His old eyes sidled to Shayne, then back at Cross. "Looks lak him all right. Yassuh, sho does. Ah reckon thass him. How come you-all kotch him so fast, Mist' Shayne?"

"This is an outrage," Cross began, stopped when he heard a loud rap on the door.

Shayne said softly, "Turn the diary over to me. . ." then opened the door.

Inspector Quinlan strode in, followed by Lawyer Hastings. Quinlan shot a quick glance at Cross and demanded: "What are you doing here?"

Jake, standing close to Shayne, said in a quavering voice: "Dat's him, Mist' Policeman. Ah seen 'im come up heah jest lak I done told."

Shayne gritted his teeth and shook his head at Jake, but the aged Negro had his cue and was determined to clear himself by identifying Cross as the afternoon visitor.

"Ah did'n' mean nothin' wrong lettin' 'im in heah dis afternoon, boss," he told the inspector earnestly. "Ah sho didn' know he was gonna kill dat gal."

"What's all this about?" Quinlan demanded of Shayne.

"It's a frame-up." Cross' voice trembled with anger. "Shayne put that janitor up to saying he saw me here this afternoon. It's a lie. I wasn't here. I don't know a damned thing about the woman who was murdered!"

"A frame-up, eh?" Quinlan scowled at Shayne. "I'll book you, so help me God, if you're pulling a fast one. And you, too." He whirled on the janitor. "Do you know you can go to jail for this?"

"Nossuh. Yo' ain' gonna do nothin' to me now after Ah done said it's him. Kin he, Mist' Shayne?"

Shayne said gently: "Don't worry, Jake. The inspector just wants to be sure."

"This is excellent," said Hastings, stepping forward briskly. "Most fortunate that you have apprehended Mrs. Meany's murderer, Mr. Shayne. You'll release my client at once," he demanded of the inspector.

"Looks as though we haven't much on him now." Quinlan admitted. He said to Shayne: "We've got Gerald Meany downstairs. Brought him over to see if the janitor could identify him. He was picked up half drunk in a joint

not far from here. He swears he didn't come here this afternoon—doesn't remember it, anyway. He admits he started out to follow his wife, but stopped for a drink and doesn't remember anything else very clearly. If your man has already identified this fellow. . ."

"But it's a lie! He didn't actually identify me. Not until Shayne told him to. Ask him yourself," Cross challenged.

"How about it?" Quinlan turned to Jake. "Give it to me straight. Did Mr. Shayne tell you to say this was the man?"

"Nossuh," Jake said earnestly. "He did'n' say nothin' lak dat. Nossuh."

"All right," said Quinlan shortly, turning to a plainclothesman lounging in the doorway. "Go downstairs and release Meany. He's in no condition to drive. You'd better take him home."

CHAPTER SEVEN

Infamous Last Words



INSPECTOR Quinlan said to Shayne: "Now give what you've got on this bird."

"Of all the God-blasted frauds!" Cross shouted.

"Remember I told you about him planning to publish Groat's diary in

the *Item*," said Shayne.

"That's right, you did." Quinlan looked at Cross with new interest. "You pointed out that he was one of the few who might have had a motive for killing Groat because of the diary."

"You'll have to do some work," Shayne told him. "I'm handing him to you on the Meany murder. I presume he had to get rid of her because she knew too much about last night."

"Is that the way it was?" Quinlan threw at Cross.

The reporter said stiffly: "I'll have a nice case of false arrest if you go ahead with this. I never saw Mrs. Meany. She asked me to come here this afternoon, but was apparently murdered before I got here."

"Don't forget," Shayne reminded him, "to explain about her calling you at four-thirty and you not getting here until seven."

"I've already told you I was busy with some work."

Quinlan raised his frosty eyebrows. "Do you still claim you aren't the man the janitor let in?"

"I not only claim I'm not, but deny it emphatically."

"That's your story," Shayne said blandly, "but you can't prove it. Frankly, Inspector, I like him for both jobs a lot better than Gerald Meany."

"He is more the type," Quinlan agreed. "Meany seems pretty much of a weakling. And

there won't be any unwritten law to mess up this case."

"Dammit," Cross protested, "stop discussing me as though you were deciding on which horse to back in the fifth."

"Where were you at eight o'clock last night?" Quinlan asked.

Cross scowled and tightened his lips. He didn't reply.

"Did you follow Groat out to the Hawley home, or did the girl call you ahead of time to warn you he was coming?"

Cross continued his stubborn silence. Quinlan made an angry gesture toward the door and gave an order to one of his men. "Take him in and book him on an open charge."

When Cross was out of the room, Quinlan said: "I don't like this too much. If your janitor messed up his identification and it was Meany who was here, we'll never prove it now. Hastings will tear down any story Jake might tell in court." He got up and picked up the brandy bottle, gauged the meager contents and emptied it. He set it down and said soberly: "Frankly, I think you're pulling one on him. I think the janitor is saying what you told him to say."

Shayne started to protest, but Quinlan waved for silence. "I've worked with you before, Shayne. Cross may be our man. But if he isn't," he went on wearily, "and if you did fix that janitor's testimony to place him here, you've practically handed Meany his freedom on a silver platter. And God help you if you've done that."

"If he isn't the killer he'll be safer in jail tonight," Shayne argued, "because someone who's already pulled two murders is still after Groat's diary. And he suspects Cross has it."

"I'd like to have a look at it," Quinlan muttered. "Any idea where Cross has it stashed?"

"All I could get out of him was that it's in a safe place." Shayne got up and stretched. "Aren't you ready to call it a day with Cross locked up?"

Quinlan studied his face for a long time. "You're up to something," he growled. "I've seen you like this before."

"At the moment I'm interested in finding more evidence against Cross," Shayne admitted readily. "I gave him to you, and now by God it's up to me to make it stick."

"I won't stand for a frame," Quinlan warned him.

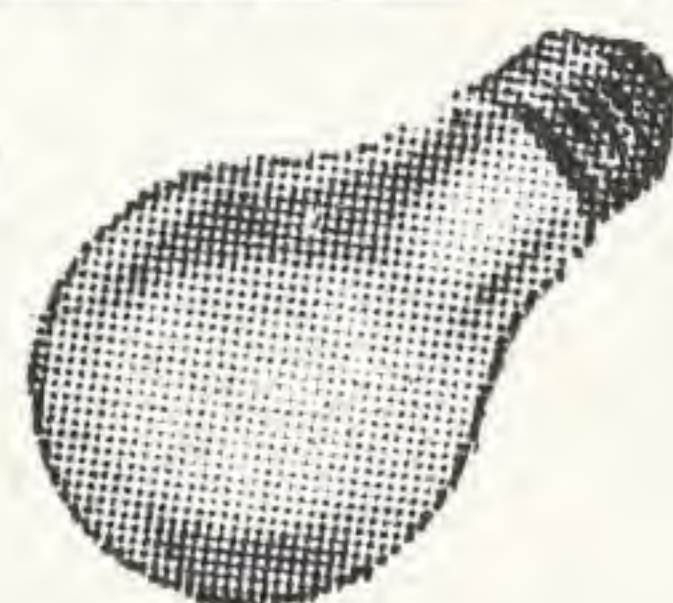
Shayne said: "Close the door on your way out. I'm headed for the bathroom."

He turned and went through the open door into his bedroom.

AFTER getting rid of the inspector, Shayne looked up Roger Deems' telephone number and called it. When Deems growled, "Who is it?" Shayne said: "Mike Shayne. One of your



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colleagues is in trouble. Joel Cross. Quinlan just locked him up on suspicion of murder."

"Good enough. Who was the victim?"

"I'm not sure he did it. I thought you might want to help him out."

"Why should I help him? I don't like the guy."

Shane said soberly: "This is serious, Roger. It isn't going to do the *Item* a bit of good. In fact, your paper is riding straight toward a damage suit."

"That's different," Deems agreed. "What's it all about?"

"Mostly a diary that Cross has in his possession illegally. I feel badly about it, Roger, because I put Cross on the spot. I don't know whether he's guilty or not. At the same time, I put your paper on the spot and I wanted to give you the tip-off."

Deems said: "Keep talking."

"It's that diary of Jasper Groat's. It contains the proof of Cross' innocence or guilt. He's playing smart and keeping it hidden. Only that isn't smart. If he's guilty, he'd better arrange to have it destroyed quick before someone else gets hold of it. If he's innocent, he'd better arrange to get it in a safer place before the real killer destroys it."

"What's your interest in this?" Deems asked suspiciously.

"The damned fool stuck his head in a frame that I only intended to frighten him with. The way things happened, I can't retract now. If he's innocent I'd like him to prove it by keeping the diary safe. If he's guilty, he'd better get rid of that diary quick for the paper's sake. There'll be a hell of a lawsuit slapped on the *Item* if certain people can prove he kept possession of it for personal reasons."

"What do you want me to do? He wouldn't listen to me."

"Can't you send him a mouthpiece? Doesn't the paper have a lawyer who can see him and find out where the diary is hidden?"

"We've got Andrew Drake on an annual retainer," Deems said. "He represents any of the boys who get caught off base."

"Get hold of Drake and explain how necessary it is to convince Cross he should take possession of the diary immediately—before the night's over. It isn't safe where Cross has it hidden."

"You talk as if you've got inside information."

"I have. I'm giving it to you straight." Shayne's voice was strained and urgent. He hung up and mopped sweat from his face. He thought for a moment, lifted the receiver and called a friend in charge of a local detective agency.

He said: "Ned? You got a man you can put on a tailing job fast. This is it. There's a lawyer named Andrew Drake. I expect him to visit a prisoner in city jail sometime this evening—

reporter—for the *Item* named Joel Cross. I want to know if and when Drake goes into his cell. Got that?"

Shayne took a deep breath as he listened. "That's right," he said. "Plant a man inside where he'll know who sees Cross. Have him call me at this number the moment Drake shows." He gave Ned his telephone number and hung up. Things were beginning to break.

He mopped his face again, strode into the kitchen and came back with a freshly opened bottle of brandy and a glass of ice water. After taking a long swig of both, he called Lucy Hamilton's apartment.

"How's Mrs. Groat holding up?"

"All right," Lucy told him. "I've been in with her tonight."

"Either of you had dinner?"

"No. I thought I'd fix something for both of us here."

"You're clairvoyant," he applauded. "I want you both standing by for a call. Keep her in your apartment all evening, angel. I may want to pick both of you up in a hurry."

"Why—what's happened?" she asked breathlessly.

He said: "I dug a hole this afternoon and pitched head first into it. Now I've got to dig myself out." He hung up.

Shayne suddenly realized he was very hungry. He went to the kitchen and hurriedly warmed a can of soup. He scrambled eggs while the soup heated and made coffee. After gulping down the food, he returned to the living room with a mug of coffee royal. He had scarcely seated himself when the telephone rang.

The voice at the other end said: "Ned said I was to call you soon as a mouthpiece named Drake came to see Joel Cross."

"That's right. Is he there?"

"Just went in Cross' cell."

"Hang around the entrance till I get there. If he leaves before I get there, tail him and call Ned first chance you get. Do you know me?"

"I've seen you."

"Right."

Shayne hung up, then called Lucy Hamilton. He said swiftly: "I'm picking you and Mrs. Groat up in front of your apartment in five minutes. Don't keep me waiting."

He drank his coffee royal, grabbed his hat and went out. He got in his car and drove to Lucy's apartment building, pulled up to the curb as Lucy and Mrs. Groat hurried out.

The rear car door was open. "Get in the back, Mrs. Groat. Lucy, get up front with me. You may have to do some driving." He pulled away and headed back toward the city jail.

"Where are we going, Mike? Why did you want Mrs. Groat?"

"Don't ask questions now, angel. We're headed for the city jail. We're going to pick up a man there when he comes out and follow him.

If he's walking, I'll get out and follow him. You follow me in the car. If he's driving, we'll all stay together."

He pulled a hundred feet back of the main entrance to the jail and stepped out. He strolled forward and was met by a toothy man wearing a faded sweater and cap. The man said: "Aren't you Shayne?"

"Right."

"I'm Tinkham—with Ned Frazier. Your man's still inside. He came in a cab and got out here at the main door."

Shayne nodded. "We'll move back here and you can point him out to me when he comes out."

They moved back and stood inconspicuously beside Shayne's car. Tinkham muttered: "Gray mustache, Panama hat. Blue serge suit and a pot belly. Five-feet-ten, about a hundred-eighty."

Shayne lit a cigarette. A man came down the steps under a bright light. Tinkham nudged Shayne, whispered, "That's him," and walked quietly away.



ANDREW DRAKE walked to the curb and stood looking up and down the street for a taxi. Shayne said to Lucy: "He'll probably take a cab."

A cruising taxi pulled up and the lawyer got in. Shayne got in his car and

took the wheel. He let the cab get into the street before starting his motor. He followed along a full block behind until the taxi swung into the curb in front of the *Item* building.

He cruised past slowly as the lawyer got out, then pulled in between two parked cars, nodding with satisfaction when the cab did not pull away.

"I think Drake will be out in a minute," he told Lucy. "I'm going back to the cab and wait. As soon as you see him come out, bring Mrs. Groat with you. I'm going to need her."

"I wish you'd tell me. . ." Lucy began, but Shayne shook his head and got out.

"There's no time now. Just follow my lead."

He went back to the cab and asked the driver: "Want a fare?"

"Sorry, bo. I'm taken. Party just went into the newspaper office a minute and asked me to wait."

Shayne casually took out a pack of cigarettes and offered the driver one. He struck a match for both and asked: "Gas rationing bother you guys much these days?"

"It ain't too bad. Can't do much—here he comes now."

Shayne hurried forward and got in the lawyer's way. He asked: "Are you Drake?"

"I am." Drake looked Shayne over and said:

"I'm sorry, but I don't believe I know you."

Shayne said: "You don't." He saw Lucy and Mrs. Groat coming toward them, said: "It's about a little matter of stolen property."

"Stolen property?" Drake drew himself up. "I don't know. . ."

"Belonging to Mrs. Jasper Groat," Shayne said harshly. "That diary you just picked up. Mrs. Groat is here and she wants it."

Lucy and Mrs. Groat stood a little aside, watching them.

The lawyer wet his lips and looked at them, bewildered. "I'm afraid I don't understand."

"It's right here in your coat pocket," Shayne snapped. He took a quick step forward and pinned Drake's arms to his pouchy body with one hand, groped in his coat pocket and withdrew a leather-bound book which he tossed to Mrs. Groat. "Do you identify that as your dead husband's property?"

"See here," Drake wheezed indignantly, "you can't get away with this. I'll call an officer."

"That'll be just fine," said Shayne, releasing him. "There's nothing I'd like better than to call the police in on this. It'll make a nice story—concealing stolen property and suppressing evidence in a murder case. Go right ahead. Is that it, Mrs. Groat?"

"Yes, oh, yes, This is Jasper's." Mrs. Groat was scanning the pages in the dim light, tears splashing her glasses.

"Hang onto it," Shayne advised her grimly. "If Drake calls the police, all you have to do is prove it belonged to your husband. How about it?" he demanded of Drake. "Do you want to tell the police *why* you're trying to keep Mrs. Groat's property from her?"

"I—I didn't realize. . ."

"Fair enough," Shayne interrupted. "I'll give you the benefit of the doubt and we won't make any complaint this time." He turned away and took Lucy and Mrs. Groat by the arm, led them swiftly to his car and trotted around to get under the wheel.

"Michael!" Lucy gasped as he whirled away. "You can't get away with it, can you?"

"I have, though." He grinned at her. "Mrs. Groat is my client. You can't arrest a man for protecting his client."

He drove speedily toward the French Quarter and stopped in front of their apartment building. He turned to Mrs. Groat and said: "Let me have the diary for tonight. You stay in Lucy's apartment tonight, and *keep your door locked!* Don't open it for anyone!"

Lucy grasped his arm. "Mike! I'm frightened for you."

Shayne leaned over and kissed her, gave her a little shove and said: "Beat it. I've got to go home and settle down to some solid reading."

Back at his own apartment, he bolted the door and scowled curiously at the black book in his hands. His lips worked as though they tasted

something good. He opened it to the fly-leaf and read, *Property of Jasper Groat, Third Engineer, S. S. Okeechobee.*

He removed his hat and coat, settled himself with a glass of brandy and balanced the diary on his knees. He flipped the pages swiftly until he came to the date of the torpedoing of the *S. S. Okeechobee*. Here he slowed down, reading each page carefully.

On the third day, Groat had written: *H is bad today. Vomited some blood after breakfast. I prayed for him but he wouldn't join me. Think he will die soon if not rescued. C sneaked some extra water at dawn. Pretended I didn't see him . . .*

Later that same day he noted: *H weaker. He repeated Lord's prayer with me. I think he will find God . . .*

On the morning of the fourth day: *H very bad. Feel sure he can't live long. Something preys on his conscience. Trust he will turn to God before the end . . .*

Late in the afternoon of that day: *H knows he is dying. I read from the Psalms and he received comfort. He is burning with fever. I think he wishes to confide in me. . .*

On the morning of the fifth day: (Shayne sustained himself with a long drink of brandy and a deep breath before reading this entry). *H died quietly during the night. We held a simple service this morning and gave his body to the sea. C pretended to sneer, but I think he was affected. I have a great weight on my conscience and must struggle with it. C crept close to us last night as H passed on. Certain he heard a portion of dying man's confession, but don't know how much. He looked at me curiously this morning and has tried to draw me out. I must ask God to help me decide . . .*

Shayne exhaled slowly and leaned back. Albert Hawley had died on the fourth night—before Ezra Hawley had passed on. Mrs. Meredith was not legally entitled to one penny from the estate.

He read on slowly. There were vague references to the "dying confession" and "arguments with C," and a simple notation: *C argues we would be fools to let this opportunity pass. I pray God for strength to withstand this temptation.*

Groat had not trusted Albert's secret to the pages of his diary. There was no mention of Leon Wallace, nothing to indicate what Albert Hawley's dying statement had been.

SHAYNE reached the airport at 8:45 the next morning, and went into an immediate huddle with officials of the airline. By showing his credentials and talking fast, he managed to get reluctant consent to pick up the package from Ben Ames in Chicago.

The big airliner swooped in gracefully and on time, and at ten minutes after nine he had

the parcel tucked securely under his arm.

He entered his office twenty minutes later. Lucy was walking up and down the front office. She whirled on him and said: "I've been trying to call you. Your phone didn't answer. I worried all night—couldn't sleep."

Shayne patted her cheek. "We're sitting in the driver's seat," he assured her heartily. "Morning mail in yet?"

She looked at her watch. "The first delivery is due now."

Shayne threw his hat at a hatrack and began ripping the wax seals from the parcel. His eyes glowed hotly as he separated two heavy cardboard sheets and drew out a glossy print of a man standing in a doorway glaring at a camera.

Lucy wrinkled her forehead quizzically as Shayne laid down the photograph and explained to her: "This is a shot of Theodore Meredith in Chicago. He's the man Mrs. Meredith married after divorcing Albert Hawley." Shayne grinned. "What's he got that would attract her?"

The picture showed Theodore Meredith to be a rather nondescript man. He might have been twenty or thirty-five, with the sort of plump features that would remain boyish-looking well up to middle age. Shayne regarded it with moody dissatisfaction, then picked up a terse typewritten report included by Ben Ames.

The report was singularly unenlightening. It told him that Meredith held a minor executive position with a garden seed concern, and his manner of living suggested some outside income beside his salary. The Merediths had moved to that address immediately after their marriage some two years previously, and in the short time allotted to him, Ames had been unable to locate anyone who had known either of them prior to their marriage. Ames ended his report by asking Shayne to wire if he wanted any more dope on Meredith.

The postman came with the early morning mail while Shayne was glancing over the report. Lucy took it and fished out a long envelope from Mrs. Wallace. She asked: "Shall I open it?"

Shayne said: "Hell, yes!" He gathered up the contents of Ames' package and went into his inner office. Lucy followed him with the open envelope and laid it before him.

It contained four empty envelopes, all addressed in ink, to Mrs. Leon Wallace, and postmarked New Orleans at six-month intervals covering the past two years. There was also a faded photograph showing a man and woman standing close together with their arms interlocked. The man was tall and lean and dark. He hadn't been more than twenty when the picture was taken. Shayne recognized the woman as Mrs. Wallace.

He studied it hungrily. A muscle twitched in

his jaw and he glanced aside at Lucy with an odd grimace. He laid the picture beside the fresh one of Theodore Meredith and muttered: "No man can change that much in a few years."

Lucy bit her lip and looked up from the photographs with wide eyes. "I didn't know. Did you suspect that Theodore Meredith was really Leon Wallace?"

Shayne's red brows were drawn down fiercely over questioning eyes. "It was a good hunch," said Shayne, avoiding Lucy's anxious gaze. "It would have explained a lot of things."

He took a bottle of brandy from the desk drawer, poured a long drink and swallowed it. He sighed and reached for the four empty envelopes accompanying the photograph, then opened a drawer and brought out the original letter Wallace had written his wife at the time of his disappearance. He compared the handwriting with that of the other four and nodded gloomily. "The same handwriting and the same ink, by God, and all written at about the same time."

He yanked his swivel chair forward and straightened up alertly. "This may be something, Lucy. I'm not an expert, but it's my guess these envelopes were all addressed at the same time Wallace wrote that letter. Someone else has been mailing his wife those thousand-dollar bills in the pre-addressed envelopes. That means he hasn't necessarily been around town to mail them. It means he isn't necessarily alive. There's no proof that he's been alive for two years as the semi-annual payments seemed to indicate."

Lucy stood silently beside his desk.

Shayne tugged at his left earlobe and a look of intense concentration settled over his face. He didn't move for five full minutes. Then he said softly: "It could be." He asked Lucy: "Have we still got a copy of the paper carrying the first story of the sea rescue—the day Cunningham and Groat were brought in?"

"I don't think we have it here, Michael. There's a copy in my apartment I've saved for the paper drive. Do you want—"

He cut her off with a swift gesture. "We've got other things to do first." His doubled fist struck the desk. "That has to be it. It's the only way things fit. We're going to have bad news for Mrs. Wallace."

"Is her husband dead, too?"

He nodded soberly. "I'm afraid he is." His voice crackled with sudden energy. "Get me the St. Charles. Room 319."

Lucy hurriedly called the number, asked for Mrs. Meredith's room and handed him the instrument. "Mike Shayne talking," he said briskly. "You'd better get over here in a hurry. Bring your lawyer if you want to." He hesitated a moment before adding: "I have that diary—and it might be for sale." He hung up and swung on Lucy. "Do you know how to reach Cunningham?"

"Yes. He gave me his telephone number yesterday."

"Call him. Tell him I have the diary and we're having a meeting in my office to decide what to do about it."

Shayne sat back and thoughtfully rubbed his jaw while Lucy made the call from her desk. She came to the door and announced: "Cunningham is on his way over."

Shayne said: "Get me Inspector Quinlan at Homicide."

Lucy used her desk telephone. She buzzed Shayne who picked up his receiver and said heartily: "Good morning, Inspector."

"What's good about it?" barked Quinlan. "I was going to call you. What's this about you assaulting a lawyer last night?"

"Drake?"

"He threatens to swear out a complaint against you."

"Fine. Tell him to be sure he specifies what I took from him."

"What's it all about, Mike? I can't make head or tail of it."

"Have you charged Cross with murder yet?"

"No. I don't know about that janitor's identification. Cross swears you put him up to it. One of my men had another talk with the

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Negro this morning, and showed him a picture of Gerald Meany and got him all confused. Right off he said Meany was the man. Then he got confused and denied it. You've got things so damned balled up I don't believe we'll get anywhere in court."

Shayne said: "That's too bad, Inspector. Will it square things if I hand you the case all sewed up in a knot?"

"Which case? Groat or Meany?"

"Both," Shayne told him cheerfully. "That is, they're the same one. Why don't you pick up Meany and bring him and Cross to my office in half an hour?"

"More rabbits out of your hat?"

"You'll be surprised. Call Lawyer Hastings and ask him to come over to see that his client's rights are protected." He hung up before Quinlan could ask more questions.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Great Impersonation



HE first to arrive were Mrs. Meredith and Jake Sims. Lucy ushered them in. Shayne said: "Get your notebook, Lucy." Then he said, "Good morning," to Mrs. Meredith, and nodded to Sims.

Mrs. Meredith was perfectly groomed and alert. She advanced toward him with narrowed eyes and asked sharply: "Where is the diary?"

He took it from his pocket and laid it on the table, waving her to a seat beside his desk. Lucy came in with her notebook and he said to his visitors: "Excuse me while I dictate a memorandum agreement. The date, Lucy. U-m-m . . .

"Agreement entered into this day between Mrs. Theodore Meredith and Michael Shayne relative to certain professional services performed and to be performed by said Michael Shayne in the matter of a legacy from the estate of the late Ezra Hawley which Mrs. Meredith claims and is desirous of acquiring.

"As payment for his professional services in substantiating her claim to the said estate, Mrs. Theodore Meredith hereby agrees to pay Michael Shayne the sum of ten thousand dollars if and when the estate legally comes into the possession of Mr. and/or Mrs. Theodore Meredith by due process of law.

"In the event that this claim is disproved and said estate does not accrue to Mrs. Theodore Meredith and/or her husband, it is further agreed that Michael Shayne's fee for professional services in this matter shall be exactly no dollars and no cents."

"What on earth makes you think I'll sign

that agreement?" demanded Mrs. Meredith.

Shayne said to Lucy: "Type it out in duplicate and bring it right in." He turned to Mrs. Meredith. "You'll sign it if you want to get your hands on a million or so dollars." He opened the diary, flipped the pages to the entry concerning Albert Hawley's death. "Hawley died the fourth night after the ship was torpedoed," he pointed out. "Ezra Hawley died the next night. What does that do to your claim?"

Mrs. Meredith bit her underlip. She and Sims both leaned forward to look at the entry. Shayne held the book in his hands. He asked: "Do you think my services will be worth ten grand?"

"What do you plan to do?" Sims asked. "Destroy the diary?"

"Let's not go into details," Shayne reproved him. "The least said about this diary, the better. If it disappears . . ." He shrugged and replaced it in his pocket. "According to the agreement Lucy is typing, I don't collect a cent unless you get the estate."

"What about Cunningham's testimony?" Sims grated.

"I think he will play ball without the diary to contradict him. Let me worry about Cunningham."

Lucy came in with two typed sheets. She closed the door and told Shayne: "Mr. Cunningham is outside."

"Let him stay there until we get this thing signed. You and Sims can witness it." Shayne passed his pen to Mrs. Meredith. "I've got you in a tight spot," he reminded her. "I've been offered five grand to throw the estate in the other direction."

She studied him coolly for a moment, read the document through, then signed her name. Shayne put his signature beneath hers. Lucy and Sims both signed as witnesses, and Shayne gave one copy to Mrs. Meredith. He folded the other and put it in his pocket.

He said to Lucy: "Now send Cunningham in. And you skip down to the newsstand and pick up a copy of the paper carrying the rescue story. He always keeps back copies for at least a week."

Lucy went out. Leslie Cunningham strode into the office. He stopped on wide-spread feet and looked at the others.

Shayne said: "Let's get this over fast before the others arrive. Quinlan is bringing two murder suspects with him and I've promised him enough to hang the guilty party. I've got Groat's diary, Cunningham. As you know, it proves that Hawley died one day too soon for him to inherit his uncle's estate. However, Mrs. Meredith is making it worth my while to see that *she* gets the money. Why don't you and she talk the same sort of a deal over? Or maybe you already have an understanding."

"Sure," Cunningham said huskily. "We understand each other. You've got the diary, huh?"

"I've got it. And I'm going to see to it she gets the estate. Suit you?"

"Suits me."

Shayne heard someone entering his outer office. He opened the door and said: "Come in, Mr. Hastings. I believe you know Mrs. Meredith and Mr. Sims. And Mr. Cunningham—the missing witness who is prepared to testify that Albert Hawley did not die until the *fifth* night after the ship was torpedoed."

"Cunningham, eh?" Hastings took off his glasses and looked at the bronzed sailor. "Does he have Groat's diary to back up his testimony? I understand it had disappeared."

"It seems to have done just that," said Shayne. "So that leaves Cunningham the only witness."

"By heavens, Shayne, I don't—"

He was interrupted by the arrival of a plain-clothesman with Gerald Meany in tow. Behind them were Quinlan and Joel Cross.

Shayne greeted them with a wide grin, saying: "I'm sorry there aren't enough chairs to go around, but this won't take long." He brought in two chairs from the outer office. "Make yourselves as comfortable as you can and we'll see if we can figure things out."

WHAT sort of hocus-pocus is this, Shayne?" Quinlan took the center of the floor and glared at the detective. "Who are all these people and how do they figure in murder?"

Shayne paused momentarily, then said: "I've been doing some more digging into this thing, Inspector. Remember the woman who came up to meet Groat the morning after he was murdered—Mrs. Leon Wallace from Littleboro? Her husband disappeared two years ago while working as a gardener for Mrs. Sarah Hawley. He wrote his wife a curious letter telling her not to look for him and enclosing ten grand. He promised her an additional grand every six months if she kept her mouth shut and didn't raise a stink about his disappearance. She didn't, and every six months since she has received the money in an envelope addressed by her husband and mailed in New Orleans. I have those envelopes here. I think laboratory tests will prove they were all addressed to her by Wallace at the time he disappeared—just prior to Albert Hawley's induction into the army and while Mrs. Albert Hawley was in Reno getting a divorce. Does that suggest anything to you?"

Quinlan said gruffly: "I recall Mrs. Wallace claiming she had a phone call from Groat. Claimed he had information about her husband and asked her to come to see him."

"That's right. So it was quite evident that Albert Hawley, who was at home when Wallace disappeared, had some guilty knowledge which he confided to Groat before he died. Right?"

"What has all this to do with a couple of murders?"

"I think it's at the bottom of them," Shayne told him calmly. "As you must have guessed, it was Groat's diary that I got from Drake last night after Cross had told his lawyer where to find it. I've checked the diary carefully and I admit Cross told the truth—no material for blackmail, or murder."

Mrs. Meredith sighed and relaxed in her chair.

Lawyer Hastings stepped forward and demanded: "Does the diary back up Cunningham's story about Hawley not dying until the fifth day?"

Quinlan roared: "Sit down. We're talking about murder. Are you saying it wasn't Cross, Shayne?"

"I'm afraid his arrest was a mistake," said Shayne pleasantly, "except it did provide a lever to bring the diary into the open so I could get my hands on it. And Cross was safer in jail."

"I told you it was a frame-up," Cross interjected angrily. "That janitor's identification was a phony."

"I'm afraid something like that did happen, Inspector. Not that I meant to frighten Jake. He didn't understand me. Right now, I'm convinced Meany is the man who visited his wife in my apartment."

Hastings got up again. "I protest that unfounded accusation, Inspector. You and I were present when the Negro positively identified this other man. He can't change his testimony at Shayne's whim."

"He's right," Quinlan raged. "We'll never be able to prove it was Meany now."

"I don't think we'll need to. I think we can prove that Mrs. Meany's murderer also killed Jasper Groat. That's the only possible motive for her death. She was expecting Groat and must have seen the murderer attack him after he arrived by taxi at the Hawley house. The murderer thought she was going to spill everything to me, so he had to get rid of her before she did."

Lucy came in with the newspaper. Shayne took the folded paper from her and placed it, front page up, on his desk. It carried big headlines proclaiming the rescue of the drifting seamen, with a picture of Groat and Cunningham taken at the dock. There was a photograph of Albert Hawley in civilian clothes, evidently dug out of the newspaper morgue for the occasion.

Quinlan grew restive. "Beatrice's husband knew she was coming to see you," he growled. "We know he found your address scribbled on a pad in her room, and followed her immediately."

Shayne said: "But let's get back to Groat's diary and the secret confided by the dying

soldier which weighed so heavily on his conscience.

"Unfortunately, Groat doesn't tell us what that secret was. He doesn't even mention Leon Wallace's name. See for yourself, Inspector." He took the book out and tossed it carelessly to Quinlan.

An audible gasp escaped Mrs. Meredith's lips. She sat erect, her eyes blazing defiantly at Shayne.

Jake Sims wet his lips and frowned, glancing quickly from Shayne to Cunningham who stood back with arms stolidly folded, dark brows drawn down and lips clamped together.

Hastings uttered an exclamation of surprise and stepped forward to peer over Quinlan's shoulder as the inspector flipped the pages after glancing hurriedly at the entries.

"There it is," said Hastings triumphantly. He pointed a finger at the line. "There's the death story in black and white. *He died quietly during the night.* That must be Hawley. He was buried on the fifth day. He died the previous night, before his uncle died." He looked at Shayne sharply. "I understood you to say Albert did not pass away until after his uncle died."

"I said that Cunningham was prepared to testify that way," Shayne reminded him, and grinned crookedly. "I think Mrs. Meredith may have influenced him somewhat in that direction."

"You dirty louse," Mrs. Meredith said distinctly and with sharp emphasis. "I don't know what your game is. I don't know why you pulled that stunt on me a few minutes ago. If you're going to accuse someone of accepting a bribe, maybe the inspector will like to see *this*." She took the signed copy of the agreement from her purse and flung it on the desk. Contempt dulled her eyes when she faced Quinlan. "Just before you arrived he induced me to sign that by promising that the diary would *not* be produced as evidence."

"Which merely proves my innate honesty," Shayne said with a cheerful grin. "That little document shows my ability to withstand temptation. It should convince even the inspector, who has unjustly suspected me several times in the past."

Quinlan's cold eyes were glaring at him, frosty eyebrows drawn together in undisguised distrust.

"Let's get down to a couple of murders." Shayne went on harshly, ignoring Quinlan's anger. "Since the diary contains no actual blackmail material, and no one connected with the case is presumed to have known the importance of the date of Albert Hawley's death at the time Groat was killed, let's see if we can figure out *why* he was murdered as he reached the Hawley house at eight o'clock and his body thrown into the river."



TILL glaring at Shayne, Quinlan slammed the book shut. "Let's do that," he agreed caustically. "All I get out of this, so far, is that Hawley told Groat *something* when he was dying and that it disturbed Groat's conscience greatly."

"Something about Leon Wallace," Shayne said. "I think the whole thing goes back to that day two years ago when Wallace disappeared. A couple of significant things happened about that time. Albert Hawley was coming up for induction into the army. His wife went to Reno to divorce him. Why did she do that?" He looked at Mrs. Meredith. She wasn't looking at him. "It wasn't a very patriotic gesture, to say the least. It couldn't have helped Albert much."

Mrs. Meredith stiffened. "Albert's induction had nothing to do with it," she burst out. "We decided on a divorce, that's all."

"But you wouldn't expect a man to be too happy about his wife deserting him just when he was to be drafted," Shayne pointed out. "Yet Hawley seems to have approved your action. So much so, in fact, that he made a new will leaving everything to you in case of death, even though you remarried after your divorce. That's something that has stuck in my craw all along." Shayne lit a cigarette and puffed on it rapidly.

"Albert loved me devotedly," Mrs. Meredith said acidly, her chin high. "He willed me everything because he wanted me to have it rather than his devil of a mother and that"—she caught herself up quickly and ended—"that no-good married to Beatrice."

Gerald Meany said meekly: "That's a falsehood. Albert and I were friends."

Shayne glanced at Gerald through half-closed eyes. He was relaxed in his swivel chair. He said impatiently: "Someone furnished Leon Wallace ten thousand dollars in cash for his wife to prevent her from going to the police about his disappearance. *Who?* Wallace didn't have any such sum. He worked as a gardener to earn money for his wife to keep their farm going. What service did Leon Wallace perform that was worth ten grand to someone—and two thousand a year thereafter as long as she kept quiet?"

"I'm sure I don't know anything about it," Mrs. Meredith said. "I scarcely remember the man."

Shayne opened his eyes wide. "Do you know, Meany?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Meany muttered wearily. He was still standing. "I don't know anybody named Leon Wallace. I don't know the name of any of the servants except the butler."

Shayne said slowly: "There's only one an-

swer that makes any sense and adds up to an explanation of Wallace's disappearance, Albert's willing his money to his ex-wife, and the secret that weighed on Jasper Groat's conscience."

He turned to Cunningham and said: "Come over here." He pointed to the picture of Albert Hawley in the newspaper. "Have you ever seen this man before?"

Thick silence gripped the office. Cunningham licked his thick, cracked lips as he studied the photograph. He glanced at Mrs. Meredith before saying: "Sure. That's Albert Hawley. Can't you read what it says?"

"It's a picture of Albert Hawley," Shayne said grimly, "but I don't think you ever saw him. How could you, when he's living in Chicago under the name of Theodore Meredith?"

Shayne disregarded the loud gasp from Mrs. Meredith. He pulled out a drawer and laid the photograph of Theodore Meredith which Ben Ames had sent him. "This was taken in Chicago last night," he explained casually.

Quinlan stepped quickly behind Shayne and stared at the two pictures. The silence grew thick again. After a little while, the inspector fixed his cold eyes on Cunningham and asked: "How could the same guy have died in a lifeboat and still be in Chicago?"

"I—don't know," Cunningham stammered. "That picture in the paper looks like the soldier named Albert Hawley."

Mrs. Meredith jumped up and started for the door. Quinlan made a gesture and his plain-clothesman blocked the way. Quinlan said: "We'll all stick around until this thing is cleared up." He circled the desk and asked Shayne: "Are you suggesting that Hawley never entered the army? That he went to Chicago,

took the name of Meredith and remarried his wife after she got a Reno divorce?"

"It's the only answer that fits. Here's a picture of the man who died in the lifeboat, Cunningham." He brought out the picture of Mr. and Mrs. Leon Wallace. "Leon Wallace, for ten grand and promise of ample support of his wife and children, impersonated Albert Hawley in the draft, and entered the army under a false name."

QUINLAN cleared his throat loudly, started to say something.

Shayne went on inexorably to Cunningham: "You knew the truth all the time. You crept up close that night while Leon Wallace was dying and heard his confession to Groat. It was a beautiful opportunity to blackmail Mrs. Hawley because you thought she was rich—and Albert, if you could persuade Groat to go along with you. But Groat wasn't a blackmailer. He was sincerely religious. He decided to make a clean breast of it, and called Mrs. Wallace to come in to see him. Then he called Beatrice Meany and told her he was coming out.

"But, he made the mistake of calling you immediately afterward and telling you what he had decided to do. You couldn't have that. It would have upset your plans. You hurried out there and lurked in the shadows until the taxi was gone, and killed him. You were upset when you didn't find the diary on him. You didn't know exactly what he had written in it and you feared publication, even though at that time you didn't realize the importance of the date of Albert's supposed death."

Cunningham growled, "Nuts," through bared buck teeth. "You can't prove a word of it. I've got an alibi."

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"If Beatrice were alive we could prove it," Shayne told him quietly. "But you took care of that, too. When you heard me say, in Mrs. Meredith's apartment, that she was waiting for me, you *had* to get there before I did and kill her. I made the mistake of killing time after I left Mrs. Meredith's room. I talked for a few minutes with Kurt Davis and stopped by at the telegraph office. You were the only person involved who knew my home address and knew Beatrice was there, and had the opportunity. Don't expect Mrs. Meredith to alibi you for that. I know you hurried back to her room after killing Beatrice, and together you planned to say you'd been there all the time. That was when she thought she was in the clear. She knows better now."

Cunningham whirled to look at Mrs. Meredith standing near the door. The expression on her face was enough to tell him that Shayne had spoken the truth. His hand darted into his coat pocket for a gun, but Quinlan grabbed him first. The plainclothesman dived in, and came up with a frothing sailor handcuffed to his wrist.

"Take him along," Quinlan said irritably. "All we need is Mrs. Meredith's testimony that he was gone from her room long enough to have committed the murder. You'll give us that!" It was a command.

"Of course." She smiled with cold mockery. "I don't want to do anything illegal."

"Illegal?" sputtered Quinlan. "After divorcing Albert Hawley and remarrying him under a different name?"

"I didn't break any law by doing that. He's still alive as Mr. Shayne has proven. His uncle's estate will come to us."

"A hell of a lot of good that will do him," Quinlan raged. "He'll spend twenty years in jail for evading the draft."

"But I won't. I didn't evade the draft."

"You're as guilty as he is." Quinlan barked. "Come along." He took her by the arm, said, "O. K., Shayne," and went out.

Lawyer Hastings lingered. When he was alone with Shayne he said in a troubled voice: "A

very clever series of deductions, Mr. Shayne. I have been most unhappy in the realization that something of this sort took place two years ago. I confess I was at a loss to understand Albert's action in leaving everything to his ex-wife, but I assure you I didn't know . . . I really didn't know about the substitution of the gardener to take Albert's place in the army."

"The old lady was the key to the whole thing," Shayne told him. "Her domineering personality and her idea that Albert was too good to serve as a common soldier. That, and the run-down condition of her estate. You assured me that Ezra Hawley had furnished them with plenty of money to get along on, but it certainly hadn't been spent on the home. That explained where the money came from to pay Mrs. Wallace—and the added income Albert received in Chicago."

Hastings sighed. "I daresay—a mother's love . . ." He waved his hand and cleared his throat. "You understand this surprising turn of affairs nullifies the fee you were to receive. I'm sure you recall it was contingent on my client receiving the estate."

"That's right," Shayne said carelessly. "Perhaps you feel I shouldn't keep the two hundred-retainer." He got out his billfold.

"No, indeed. You must keep that. I insist." Hastings settled his Panama on his head and went out.

Lucy, who had been listening in a corner and taking notes, said: "I should say it's little enough. I suppose you won't even send Mrs. Wallace a bill."

"For explaining to her that her husband is dead? No, angel." He grinned broadly. "A strange case. Mrs. Wallace has fourteen grand in the bank. Mrs. Groat has her husband's diary which she can sell to any newspaper for a small fortune." He sighed. "I'll try to be satisfied with the ten thousand I'll collect from Mrs. Meredith-Hawley when the estate is probated."

He patted the folded agreement in his pocket and poured himself a long drink.



FOR VICTORY . . . BUY WAR BONDS



"Just a case of a guy playing ghoul and getting knocked for a goal," decided the manager of the swank San Alpa. But O'Hanna, the streamlined house dick, had to assemble the jigsaw of the dried blood on the fake beard, the original draft of the Gettysburg Address and the bomb in the back of Grandfather's car. Not to mention a very stubborn corpse.



Eva Taine said: "I saw it with my own eyes! It was Grandpa's ghost and it tried to strangle me!"

HEIR IN THE AIR

By DALE CLARK

CHAPTER ONE

Haunted Hotel

An
O'Hanna
Novelette

BLOND Eva Taine was tousle-headed and panic-eyed. She wore a negligee a little thicker than a cobweb, and a blue-and-gold bellhop's coat. The negligee was what she'd been wearing when she rushed screaming into the lobby. The coat was what they'd covered her up with

as they hustled her into manager Endicott's private office.

She said: "I tell you, I saw it with my own eyes! I woke up and it was bending right over my bed! It was Grandpa's ghost, and it tried to strangle me!"

The thin-faced, graying Endicott listened in tsk-tsk disapproval. Endicott didn't believe Eva Taine's spook story, and he didn't think the paying guests at the fifteen-dollar-a-day-on-up resort hotel would believe it, either. He was afraid the Hollywood week-enders and West Coast socialities would figure there was a real life, flesh-and-blood stranger on the loose at San Alpa.

It doesn't do the luxury hotel business any good to have crimes committed against its clientele, and Endicott argued against the whole idea.

He spoke curtly: "You were just dreaming, Miss Taine." Then he turned to O'Hanna, the San Alpa house dick, and asked him: "Wasn't she just dreaming, Mike?"

O'Hanna was a tall Irishman, and a long hop-step-and-jump from the average, toothpick-eating lobby cop. Hired to keep the California mountain resort an upper-class playground instead of a happy hunting ground for crooks, O'Hanna was supposed to squelch wrong-doing before the paying guests even knew anything had happened.

Of course, he couldn't help it if they had bad dreams. But—was this just a dream?

O'Hanna's Irish-gray glance rested on the negligee that did almost nothing to keep the blonde from catching her death of cold. The part of it which interested him most was the lacy neck of the garment. Nothing about Eva Taine's slim, rounded throat showed any signs of struggle with a strangler.

"I don't know," the house dick admitted. "What makes you so sure it was your grandfather, Miss Taine?"

"It had a beard—a white beard. Even in the dark I could see that. And then there was the way it breathed." Eva Taine shivered inside the negligee and the borrowed bellhop's jacket.

"Breathed?"

"As if it had a tin whistle in its throat. I'll never forget Grandpa Taine breathing like that when he had his attacks of asthma."

O'Hanna said: "Still, ghosts don't just happen! There's generally a reason why they come back—"

Endicott interrupted sharply. "You're crazy. Ghosts don't happen at all, for *any* reason whatsoever."

"I'm asking her. Did the ghost say what he wanted, beside strangling you?"

She moistened her lips. "I—I'm not sure. He muttered something about the cat, about teaching me to let the cat alone. . . ."

O'Hanna caught the cat on the first bounce. "You grandfather didn't happen to be old Colonel H. C. Taine?"

The blonde said: "Yes."

"Rubbish," Endicott fumed. "It wasn't any of her dead relatives. It was probably the lobster thermidor on the table d'hôte dinner—" and stopped, did a double-take with his mouth muscles as if he'd just suddenly remembered Colonel H. C. Taine.

Endicott said: "Colonel Taine? The one who left a hundred thousand dollars to his pet cat?"

O'HANNA recalled the newspaper publicity at the time. Both times, in fact. It had all started when a black kitten, belonging to one of the servants, had crossed the path just as the old gentleman was coming out to his limousine. Colonel Taine had been superstitious enough to turn back to his front door and start the trip all over again. The chauffeur, standing there beside the open limousine door, had thought his employer had changed his mind about the drive, so he closed the door. When he did, four sticks of dynamite under the back seat had blown the cushion clean through the top.

It had been necessary to bury the chauffeur, as O'Hanna remembered the story. That made it murder, but the Los Angeles police had never been able to pin the dynamiting on anybody else. As for the black kitten, it had been adopted into the family and—when the old gentleman died of heart failure—there'd been a clause in his will setting up a trust fund to support the cat as long as it lived.

O'Hanna asked: "What'd he mean, let the cat alone?"

"I—I'm not sure. I screamed and sat up in bed and tried to turn on a light." The blonde widened her eyes at O'Hanna. "There was a blinding flash, and Grandpa turned to smoke before my eyes!"

Endicott swallowed a word. After all, she was a paying guest and the granddaughter of a millionaire.

The girl said: "It's the truth! It scared me so I jumped out of bed, and the next thing I knew I was running across the hotel grounds toward the main building."

O'Hanna looked his surprise.

Eva Taine explained: "I'm staying in one of your hotel cottages—chalets, you call them."

O'Hanna had known she was registered in one of the chalets—tourist cabins, he privately called them. Chalet was just the fifty-dollar word, coined by Endicott to justify the super-duper price charged for these accommodations. For in the swankiest California resort hotels, a cottage on the grounds is considerably classier—and costlier—than a suite in the hotel itself. A chalet at San Alpa spells what a penthouse apartment means in New York or Chicago.

It wasn't the chalet that surprised O'Hanna. He put it in words: "But you stopped to put on the negligee?"

"No, I wore it to bed. I curled up with a book and must have fallen asleep over it."

Endicott sniffed. "A book of ghost stories?"

O'Hanna ignored Endicott, said: "Then, when you fell asleep reading, there was a light burning in the room?"

"No—I mean yes. I remember half waking up with the light bothering my eyes. I switched it off and turned over and went back to sleep." She sighed. "It sounds silly, but I'm afraid to go back there alone. . ."

O'Hanna said: "Let's sneak out the back door."

It didn't prove her story was true, but O'Hanna heard the blonde catch her breath as they stepped out onto the night-cooled concrete driveway circling from the service door—she hadn't stopped for mules, she'd come barefoot. Past the driveway, though, the hotel lawn was as perfect as a golf green. The steep-roofed, Swiss-styled chalets were farther down the slope, hidden among black oak and pine trees.

She didn't like the pine needles. It didn't prove her story exactly, but as he threw a flashlight under the trees he could see she hadn't stopped to dodge needles the first time. There was dew enough to take a footprint. And she'd left footprints across the grass instead of following the picturesquely curving paths.

She'd left the chalet door open, too. They climbed stone steps to reach the threshold, snapped on lights in a knotty-pine paneled hallway, opening on the left into a paneled living room with peasant footstools scattered around the floor and sporting prints scattered around the walls. On the right, doors opened into bed chambers.

The blonde said: "This one."

O'Hanna went in first, pressed a wall switch, and lit up a chandelier. The light she'd reached for was a reading lamp that had a chain dropping from the bed head. That bulb didn't

light. He touched it and it was loose in its socket.

The open window hadn't blown away a strong smell of burnt match around the bed.

O'Hanna went to this window, aimed the flashlight onto the grass outside, and saw tracks in the dew. He said, "Excuse me while I play bloodhound," and forked a leg over the sill.

The footprints ran upslope, about as easy to follow as U.S. No. 1. They led O'Hanna to the front steps of a chalet fifty yards above Eva Taine's.

He climbed the steps, thumbed a bell button.

A chime rang two notes, immediately followed by a gun crash.



'HANNA threw the door open, but the other man had a running start, and he had a fistful of something to help clear the way. He clipped O'Hanna like the Notre Dame backfield carrying hand hatchets.

The house dick went down, groveled, and rose on one knee. His back teeth vibrated in their sockets. His left eye ached. He was conscious, though, and he didn't have to pinch himself to make sure. He knew the backfield had bounced off him and whirled and run the other way.

Apparently it ran into somebody else because a voice said, "Ow!" loudly and there was a sound of falling.

O'Hanna stood up. This took time. The trouble was in his legs. His legs buckled and he had to grab at the wall. He knew tears were trying to wash hot needles out of his eye. He took careful, weaving steps with his hand braced against the wall.

There was a sound of swearing. Then a light snapped on, turning a doorway yellow. O'Hanna reached the doorway and stopped, leaning a shoulder against the jamb.

In front of him, a man in bright green pajamas was down on his knees reaching for a

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gun under the bed. Addressing O'Hanna, he said: "Hell, he got away." He rescued the gun from under the bed, pointed it at the open window and said: "He jumped out there. But I got a shot at him, anyway."

O'Hanna lurched to the window. The shadow cast by his body stopped him from seeing anything. He moved to one side and peered down to the spill of window light on the grass.

There were footprints in the dew.

O'Hanna started to slide a leg over the sill. The green-pajamaed man came and grabbed the house dick's shoulder. "Hey, not so fast!" He punched a revolver at O'Hanna's face.

O'Hanna had been clipped over the left ear, and it hurt. Up close, it looked as if two hands and two revolvers were pointed at him. He had an idea it would hurt a lot more if one of them went off.

"Not so fast," Green Pajamas said. "Just kindly say who the hell you are and what you're doing here."

He was a fattish man, the skin of his face pink and shiny and filled out with lard. There was a kind of slick dampness about the pink skin, like the fat sleek toadstools which pop up under mountain trees after a rain.

O'Hanna said: "Let go, you fool—I'm the house officer."

"Yeah? Says you."

"There's a badge in my pocket."

"Keep away from your pockets." The fat pink face floated back. He kept the gun pointed. He lifted a phone from the bedside table.

"Operator," the man said, "this is Mr. Lucas Kuhn in chalet 21-A. I've got a prowler here who claims to be your house dick. Ask the manager to come down and see if he can identify the guy."

O'Hanna said: "Ask her what I look like, sap." But Lucas Kuhn had hung up.

O'Hanna stood and cooled off with the window behind him. It wasn't as good as an ice-pack, but it helped. He fingered the spot. There was a little blood on his fingers and a little blood on the floor. His?

"Stand still, you," Lucas Kuhn warned.

O'HANNA stayed still. He figured he had but one life, and why wager it on the whimsy of a trigger-happy paying guest? He said: "O.K., you've got me stopped, but it doesn't mean we have to stall our brains. What'd the fellow look like?"

"That's just the trouble. I couldn't see in the dark." Lard creases half-closed the pajama-clad man's eyes. "It might even have been you!"

"Me! You said he went through the window!"

"You could have jumped out the window and run in the front door again," Lucas Kuhn said. He thought it over and said: "Or there could

have been two prowlers—the other guy and you."

He kept the gun pointed. He said: "I'm playing it safe. You're staying put until the manager identifies you."

O'Hanna shrugged, let his keen gray glance drift around the room. He asked suddenly: "You don't see any bullet holes in here, do you?"

"That old gag won't buy you anything."

"Gag?"

"Sure. Like the one boxer says to the other, 'Your shoelace is untied,' ha-ha." It wasn't a loud ha-ha, just a whispered giggle slipping through Lucas Kuhn's plump-lipped leer. Vastly condescending, he giped: "Hell, you don't think I'm going to be dumb enough to take my eyes off you and start looking around for bullet holes?"

A wise-guy. O'Hanna said: "Now I'll tell one. Like the boy on the merry-go-round, I can see you've been around—but it's not getting you anywhere. Suppose you stop and think what no bullet hole means."

Kuhn said: "It was just a wild shot. It went out the window, I guess."

"Out the window is right," the house dick mused. He changed tactics abruptly. "Mr. Kuhn, how long since you've been bothered ha'nts?"

The lard-faced man forked his eyebrows. "I've been what?"

"Pestered by ghosts."

"You're nuts. What in hell put such a screwy notion as that in your head?"

"You sound as if you don't believe in spooks."

"You're right, I don't."

O'Hanna asked: "You wouldn't go for the theory that this intruder wasn't a sneak thief—but somebody trying to play on your fears by posing as the spirit of Colonel H.C. Taine?"

The other's rotund, shiny features alerted. "Is that your theory? How do you figure it?"

"This way. Within the last half hour, somebody broke into Eva Taine's chalet below here and staged a now-you-see-it, now-you-don't act. From there, the trail led straight to your door. Pardon me for asking, what's the connection?"

Lucas Kuhn batted his eyes. He said: "Why, Eva is a sister-in-law of mine. But I didn't even know she was here at San Alpa. The rest of it throws me for a total loss."

O'Hanna said: "Let me make a suggestion. Ghosts hardly ever bring good news! As a rule, they dish out punishment or warnings. Maybe you and Eva had done something to make Grandfather Taine get up out of his grave and start walking?" He broke it off as footfalls hurried into the chalet and brought a round-eyed and breathless Endicott into the doorway.

Endicott said: "Good heavens, Mike! What on earth—"

Lucas Kuhn interrupted. "He really is the house dick? I guess that leaves me holding the bag—with a horselaugh inside it." Lowering the gun, he addressed fulsome apologies to the detective. "If I hadn't butted in, no doubt by this time you would have had the prowler caught! Thanks to my bullheaded blundering, I'm afraid he's got the headstart on us! I could kick myself all over the mountain. . ."

O'Hanna's mood was nasty. "Yeah, and if the dog hadn't stopped to lap up the spilled milk, he'd still have caught the rabbit. Let's drop the Alphonse-and-Gaston act and get going."

Flashlight in hand, the Irishman swung himself over the window sill. The footprints across the wet grass made a nice trail for a hundred feet, but then they merged into one of the paths—and there was no way of telling which direction the fugitive had taken.

O'Hanna swore as he turned back to the chalet. Inside, Lucas Kuhn was barreling his plump legs into his britches while Endicott hovered over him and said: "It was a perfectly natural mistake, Mr. Kuhn. You can't blame yourself a bit. Anybody waking up and finding strange men running around in his bedroom has a perfect right to be suspicious."

Kuhn grumbled: "All the same, I'll never forgive myself if the crook gets away."

"He got away," O'Hanna reported, "so we'll have to play it the hard way with questions and answers—"

He hadn't time to fire a question, though, before the bedside phone rang. Kuhn's hand reached out, but the house dick got there first.



IT WAS for O'Hanna, anyway. Little Doc Raymond, the house physician, was on the other end of the wire. Doc said he was in 207, and continued: "You better hurry. There's a dead man here with a bullet hole in him."

O'Hanna told Lucas Kuhn: "Pal, you were right. Your shot went through the window—inside the guy you hit. So let's have the gun."

Kuhn handed it over, and O'Hanna swung out the .38's cylinder. There was one exploded hull in the chambers, and four live ones. O'Hanna took up the phone again: "Operator, give me the desk. . . Hullo, it's Mike. Who's registered in 207?"

The night clerk's voice came back: "A man named Oscar Mullet."

O'Hanna relayed it to Lucas Kuhn. "Mean anything to you?"

"Mullet?" Kuhn jammed his pajama sleeves into a street coat. "Sure. He's the caretaker—the cat's caretaker. You see, Grandfather Taine left an income to keep his pet cat, Lochinvar, supplied with milk for the rest of its life."

O'Hanna cut in: "Let's travel while we talk." He snared the pink-faced man's arm, steered him toward the door. "O.K., he's the cat's caretaker. So what?"

"Nothing—only Lochinvar has been ailing lately. Mullet's got the damned fool idea some of us are trying to poison the kitty!"

"Why?"

"It's the money he's worried about. When that cat dies, Mullet's going to have to find himself some other means of support. While the cat's alive, the caretaker has free room and board plus the income from the trust fund."

O'Hanna asked: "And when the cat dies, you and Eva Taine split the hundred grand?"

Kuhn denied it, said: "I'm only related by marriage. It'd be my wife who'd do the splitting, along with Eva and her brother, Johnny Taine."

The trio crossed the hotel grounds, entered the lobby this time by way of its twin plate-glass front doors.

O'Hanna opened 207 and was a little surprised to encounter a tense, tight-faced, bow-legged citizen all dolled up in a tuxedo and cummerbund.

The detective asked: "Dr. Raymond?"

The bow-legged man said: "He's in there—with it."

A thumb jerk went with this, directed the house detective to the bathroom door.

A pair of shoes pointed their water-soaked soles through this doorway. Bits of lawn-mowed grass were dew-plastered onto the soles. O'Hanna stepped closer, and legs swam into view, then a crumpled arm angled out from the torso.

Doc Raymond was crouched over a profile on the bathroom floor that showed a wide-open eye as bright and shiny as a piece of liver.

O'Hanna asked: "Who called you, Doc?"

Bow-Legs supplied: "I did. I found this man out in the corridor a few minutes ago, apparently either sick or drunk. He asked me to please help him to his room, and I did so. Then he asked me to unlock his door, so I unlocked it. He requested me to help him to the bathroom, which I did. He told me to go away, but immediately afterward he fell unconscious on the floor, and I took it upon myself to call for medical assistance."

"You didn't notice he was bleeding?"

"No, sir." Bow-Legs was the sallow, fiftyish type. Thinning brown hair parted from a middle stripe lent his hatchety features a scholarly, professorial look. "He was so doubled-up that I couldn't see his shirtfront. I did notice that he kept one hand pressed there, as if suffering from severe indigestion."

"Your name?"

"Why, I'm Alexander Janathan." Alexander Janathan seemed slightly surprised he had to tell anybody who he was.

"Room number?"

"I'm directly down the hall—in 218."

"O.K., Mr. Janathan. You can go, but you'd better not discuss this with anybody before Sheriff Gleeson talks to you."

The bow-legged man coughed behind a sallow hand, corrected: "Professor Janathan."

"O.K., Professor." O'Hanna waved him away, beckoned Lucas Kuhn closer. "Identify him?"

Kuhn was shaken. "It's Mullet, all right. My God, I'd give my right arm if I hadn't fired that shot!"

ENDICOTT made reassuring sounds. "It isn't your fault. Besides, he shouldn't have run away after he was shot. If he'd surrendered, probably prompt medical attention could have saved his life."

Secretly, Endicott was reassuring himself that it wasn't really a case of murder at all. Violent death is never welcome in a resort hotel, but at least this wasn't a murder mystery involving the paying guests in an unpleasant slay-scandal.

"Frankly," the manager pronounced verdict, "it's nobody's fault except his own. It's just a case of a guy playing ghoul and getting knocked for a goal."

O'Hanna had swung to study the corpse. A metal object bulked out one of Oscar Mullet's coat pockets. O'Hanna knelt, tugged forth a T-shaped metal trough supported by a trigger-equipped handle.

Endicott peered and said: "Why, that's a photographer's flashgun—the kind they used before flash-bulbs were invented. It explains the flash and the smoke cloud in Miss Taine's chalet."

Endicott looked like Sherlock Holmes as he said it, and Lucas Kuhn played an admiring Dr. Watson. "I guess you're right. Mullet thought one of us was trying to poison the cat, and he evidently thought dressing up like Grandpa's ghost was the way to stop us."

Little Doc Raymond gestured. "Lend a hand, Mike."

O'Hanna helped lift the corpse. The other hand had been under the body, and now as they turned the corpse they saw this hand clutched a Santa Claus style set of whiskers. It had been a white beard once. It was red now from having been pressed to the bullet wound, and the blood was stiffening the whiskers as it dried.

"That absolutely proves it," Endicott settled the case for keeps. "There's the disguise he wore to scare Miss Taine."

O'Hanna eyed the clue skeptically. He challenged: "Yeah, but how long has this blood been drying, Doc?"

The house physician tossed his diagnosis like a hand grenade. "Mike, it's screwy, but in my opinion he's been dead at least half an hour."

O'Hanna's wristwatch said it was 1:10. It'd be 2:10 by the time the sheriff covered sixty miles of mountain road to get here. By the time he picked up the phone to call Sheriff Gleeson, Endicott was making a speech over the corpse.

CHAPTER TWO

Holograph Hunter



ENDICOTT took it tough. He'd had it all wrapped up as accidental homicide, and now the thing was turning into a cold-blooded kill. He contradicted: "Half an hour is impossible! It's hardly been that long since Eva Taine saw this guy playing ghost. It's not more than ten or twelve minutes since Kuhn fired the fatal shot. So how can you stand there and say he was dead before any of those things happened?"

The medico protested: "I don't say it. The blood on the beard says it."

Endicott scowled. "Another thing. It's not more than five minutes since Professor Janathan found this man out in the corridor. Good heavens, why would he lie about a thing like this?"

O'Hanna nodded. "Why would he? You're taking the words right out of my mouth."

The house dick swiveled to the staring Kuhn. "Who the hell is this guy Janathan, anyway?"

"Search me. I never heard of him before." Lucas Kuhn stretched a fleshy hand. "I guess it's O.K. if I take my gun back now."

O'Hanna said: "That's your guess. Mine's different."

The pink-faced man didn't like it. He put up an argument. He said: "Look, if Oscar Mullet has been dead half an hour, that shot of mine didn't kill him, and my gun can't possibly be legal evidence."

O'Hanna said: "That's one way of looking at it. Another way is, if you didn't shoot him—how do we know you didn't shoot somebody else. There's a chance of another corpse turning up with a slug in it, and I'm keeping the gun."

Keeping the weapon in his pocket, the house dick headed down the corridor to 218. Professor Alexander Janathan had switched from tux and cummerbund to a corduroy, velvet-collared smoking jacket. Affably, he waved a corncob pipe as he greeted O'Hanna. "Excuse the Missouri meerschaum, but frankly I'm just a farm boy at heart! You can have your coffin-nails and Corona Coronas, for my part I'll take my nicotine barnyard style. I find it's cooler on the tongue that way—"

O'Hanna interrupted. "Were you really born on a farm, Prof?"

"As a matter of fact—no. I'm actually a scion of Chicago. I was raised in the shadow of the old Historical Museum on North Dearborn. I suppose that's how I got interested in my specialty. From the time I was knee-high to a glass showcase, I used to hang around the exhibits in there. I practically cut my teeth on the old-fashioned dragoon pistols, the whaling harpoons, the ship's models and so on."

O'Hanna queried: "Your specialty? What's that?"

"I'm a dealer in holographs."

"Holy-whats?"

Alexander Janathan chuckled. "It means handwritten documents, especially those from the pens of important historical and literary personages. For instance, if you had a letter written by Mark Twain in your pocket, I'd cheerfully pay you a hundred dollars for it—and no questions asked. From there the rates go on up, and you could practically write your own ticket for the original copy of the Gettysburg Address as inscribed by Abraham Lincoln. I don't mean the second copy he dashed off later and gave to Horace Greeley, but the genuine, original, first draft. It would be worth—well, thousands and thousands." The hatchety man waved his corn-cob pipe, said: "But pshaw! I'm dreaming. What would a house detective be doing with the Gettysburg Address in his pocket? It's a ridiculous idea, isn't it?"

O'Hanna confided: "The only handwritten document I'm interested in is a murder confession, telling how Oscar Mullet got killed half an hour ago."

Professor Janathan cocked an eyebrow. "Did you say half an hour ago?"

"The doctor said half an hour ago. I'll tell you a secret—the blood was partly dried on the false beard Mullet had clutched to his wound."

The other took it calmly. "I'll tell you a secret right back. You'll never be able to prove it in court!"

"No?"

"No, and here's why. There's no way to keep that clue intact! There's no process for preserving a bloodstain in the exact condition you find it. It'll be a lot drier by the time the coroner arrives, and it'll be just caked blood when the case comes to trial—if there is a trial."

Janathan came up out of his chair, balanced himself on his bow-legs, aimed the pipestem at O'Hanna. He declared: "So the jury would have only your house physician's word—and he's no pathologist—any smart defense lawyer would tear him to pieces. A smart lawyer would simply hire half a dozen experts to drive the jury nuts with their double-talk. It'd wind up the way expert testimony usually does, with the jury not knowing who to believe."

O'Hanna asked: "And there'd be you, swearing you saw and talked to Oscar Mullet twenty-five minutes after his supposed death."

ALEXANDER JANATHAN swung his pipestem to a corner of his thin mouth, made a sound with his pipe like frying an egg. Innocent-eyed, he queried: "Me? Why drag me into it? I don't want to be the ruin of your case! All I ask is to be left alone! I'm a sleeping dog that bites only when kicked."

The detective conceded: "You could go even farther and say you're a lowdown, mangy, hound-dog. To that I'll agree—the rest of it, I'll argue to a finish."

The holographist showed no alarm—quite the contrary, he grinned. "I'll surprise you, shamus. If Mullet died half an hour ago, you've got absolutely nothing on me. My alibi is iron-clad." The grin curled derisively. "Here's why—I was sitting up with Johnny Taine tonight."

O'Hanna reflected. It'd been Eva Taine first, then Kuhn, now there was yet another heir in the air. "Johnny? So he's here, too?"

"He's here, period, as far as I'm concerned."

O'Hanna quizzed: "And just how are you concerned?"

"It's commercial. Johnny's grandfather, old Colonel Taine, left a rather large collection of holographia to his family. Johnny's different—he collects night club chorines, and he's spent plenty of money," Janathan enlightened. "I've been trying to trade him my autograph on a check for some of those rare old historical documents he inherited."

"Trying? You mean he wouldn't sell?"

"He's too willing—he wants to sell the works, lock, stock, and barrel. It just so happens Colonel Taine wasn't a discriminating collector. His was the old story of the millionaire and a hobby-horse. A man as rich as he gets no thrill out of Packards and pearls—too many other millionaires can have those things. There aren't enough George Washington and Thomas Jefferson holographs to go around—that's what makes them valuable. I'm trying to say, the colonel had the bankroll, but he didn't have the expert judgment. He owned some really rare items, but most of his collection was just plain junk." The bow-legged man paused as if suddenly thought-struck. "But, shucks! I don't know why I'm telling you all this. The Catlin Papers couldn't mean anything to a hotel detective."

O'Hanna protested: "But I am interested in cats."

Alexander Janathan fried another egg in his corn-cob. "I didn't say cats, I said Catlin. It goes 'way back in American history. George Catlin was a famous artist who took to studying the American Indians. His letters command a high value on account of the sketches he drew in the margin."

"Yeah. Now let's bring the history down to

date. You say Johnny Taine inherited these Catlin letters from his granddad, and you've been trying to buy them from him. Where did this ironclad alibi take place?"

"You'll find Johnny in 431. I was returning from his room when I found Mullet in the hall down here."

O'Hanna scorned: "Pardon me for not laughing, but I've heard you tell that one before."

But the house dick's eyebrows were battened down in a perplexed scowl as he walked away from the bow-legged holographist. That Jonathan had lied, he didn't doubt—the question was, why? It sounded as though the professor wanted to pin the murder rap on himself! He was doing his damndest to fix the slay schedule so he wouldn't have an alibi!

O'Hanna reached the battery of elevators, punched an UP button. Glumly, he reminded himself—Alexander Janathan hadn't cooked up his cockeyed yarn just to stick his neck in a noose. The professor stood to gain from his fable about the corpse living half an hour longer than it really had.

Twin elevator doors slid apart—and Lucas Kuhn bolted out between them, lurched headlong into the detective's arms.

"Help!" the plump man sobbed. "Oh, it's you! Thank God! I just had the most hair-raising experience!"

"Such as?"

Lucas Kuhn breathed hard. "I started back to the chalet, Mr. O'Hanna. I'd no sooner set foot in the darkness than the killer tried to lasso me!"

"Lasso you? For God's sake!" the house dick exploded his open disbelief.

"That's right. He looped a rope right around my neck. It's only by dumb, blind instinct I managed to throw it off and run for my life."

O'Hanna doubted aloud: "I know. You want your gun back."

Lucas Kuhn said hoarsely: "You're damned right I want my gun back. There's a murderer on the loose. I can see it all now—he killed Mullet first, then he tried to strangle Eva, and this makes twice he's tried for me. My blood's on your hands if he strikes again and I'm not armed to defend myself."



RRITABLY, O'Hanna sighed: "Oh, come on. I'll be your bodyguard."

He waved Kuhn back into the elevator, and said to the wide-eyed operator: "Fourth floor."

"Fourth. . . You aren't even going to investigate my story!" the pink-faced man accused bitterly.

"I'm investigating it my own way." O'Hanna led the way out into the fourth-floor corridor. "Let's be logical about it. How do you explain

this wholesale vendetta against your entire household?"

"I can't, but I'm getting a hunch it all goes back to the first time—the attempt to dynamite Grandfather Taine and me."

O'Hanna was surprised. "You were in the dynamite deal, too?"

"Certainly. I was supposed to be right there in the back seat with the old man. I'd already chucked my briefcase and topcoat into the car, then I remembered a letter I was supposed to mail. I went back into the house after it, otherwise I'd have been blown to bits." Lucas Kuhn shuddered and said: "You know, the biggest piece of that briefcase we ever found wasn't any larger than an inch square."

"I didn't know, but I've been wondering. How could the killer be sure Colonel Taine was inside when the dynamite blew up?"

Lucas Kuhn said: "It was clever—hellishly clever. The Bomb Squad figured it was a double switch, wired to work when the car door closed, but also wired so contact was impossible without a weight pressing down the seat cushion. Apparently the topcoat and briefcase supplied just enough weight so the juice fed to the dynamite cap without a human being inside the car."

They'd reached 431, and found the door unlocked.

Startled exclamations came from the pair in 431—a man and a woman. The man—Johnny Taine—was fair-haired and puffy-faced, pallid-skinned except for the alcohol crimsoning his fleshy nose.

Johnny Taine had been hitting the hooch, and there was whiskey on the breath he whooshed at O'Hanna in the doorway.

"Whyinell don'cha knock before you come barging into wrong rooms?" he yelped.

"It's the right room. I'm the house detective."

Johnny Taine giggled. "You're off-base this time, snooper! This lady happens to be my sister, so pfooeey on you!"

O'Hanna looked at the sister. She wasn't Eva Taine. This one was red-headed, and she was older, and she was so thin she could almost have used a broomstick as a dress form.

The explanation came as Lucas Kuhn bobbed around O'Hanna's elbow, and gurgled: "Good Lord, it's Belle—my wife."

That seemed to make the family reunion complete, thought O'Hanna.

The red-haired woman said to Lucas Kuhn: "Your ex-wife, you mean, you beast."

"You two are divorced?" O'Hanna surmised.

Lucas Kuhn said: "She has an interlocutory decree, but it isn't final yet."

The divorce angle was new, and it was the last straw on the camel's back. O'Hanna's black Irish streak flashed as he exploded: "Holy—Well, if you folks have got any more heirs, in-

laws, cat caretakers, and grandfathers' ghosts—let's hear about them now. I'm tired of bumping into a brand-new Taine family skeleton every time I open a door!"

JOHNNY TAINE wrapped up a giggle in bourbonized breath, tossed it at O'Hanna. "Snooper, you sound higher'n I feel. . ."

Belle Kuhn said freezingly: "Johnny, keep out of this. I'll attend to the man." She turned to the detective, a prim, grim expression on her blade-thin face.

"Our family skeletons," the red-head stated, "happen to be our affair, and not this hotel's."

"Then why don't you keep them at home, why unload 'em on San Alpa?" O'Hanna gave a dour headshake. "Everything about your family is my business from here on in. I'll begin by asking you just what accounts for this gathering of the clan, this rush of your relatives to San Alpa?"

Belle snapped: "That's impertinent. You operate a public resort, don't you? You advertise in the newspapers, you put up posters in the travel agencies, you supply publicity folders in every hotel rack on the West Coast. You practically beg the public to patronize the place. Is it a crime to rent a room here?"

O'Hanna handed it back to her. "Yes, it's a crime—and we found the body."

It took the starch out of Belle Kuhn. "You found *what*?" she managed.

Lucas Kuhn chipped in. "He's not kidding, Belle. Oscar Mullet is dead downstairs." He cleared his throat. "And there've been two attempts on my life in the last hour."

O'Hanna asked: "You knew nothing about this, Mrs. Kuhn?"

"No—nothing—" Her broomstick figure spun half around at the sound of her brother's giggling. She screamed: "Johnny, stop that! It isn't funny!"

Johnny Taine's eyes were blank, and he might have been looking at a moving picture nobody else could see.

O'Hanna stared at the fair-haired playboy. "What in hell ails you, anyhow?"

The red-headed woman said: "He isn't himself. He's been drinking. Johnny has been ill, unable to attend to his own affairs. I have a court order, a kind of power-of-attorney."

Johnny Taine snickered. "I'm a dipso. Belle's my guardian. It's a good joke on that guy Janathan." All by himself, he enjoyed a laugh over the good joke.

The skin at the back of O'Hanna's neck crawled a little. Johnny Taine's tittering laughter was nice to have around, if you had to choose between it and the noise a rattlesnake makes.

He asked: "What about Janathan?"

"Janathan's a racketeer," Belle said indignantly. "He's the one who got my brother roaring drunk tonight. He was trying to persuade Johnny to sell him some extremely rare historical papers for a song."

Johnny Taine gave with the giggles. Tears of merriment formed in his eyes. "It's a hot one, huh? Imagine the guy pouring all that free firewater into me when I can't even legally sign my own name!"

"It's side-splitting," O'Hanna agreed. He conned the red-headed Belle. "And where were you during this firewater frolic?"

Her expression was venomous. "The professor fooled me, too. He expressed an interest



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in buying *my* share of Grandfather's collection of holographia. I was in my own room, drawing up a list of the items and figuring out an asking price. When I had decided, I tried to telephone Janathan's room. When he didn't answer, I became suspicious. I stepped across the hall and found him trying to take advantage of my brother with alcohol."

"Yeah? What time was that?"

"Shortly before one o'clock in the morning, perhaps five minutes to one."

Lucas Kuhn figured and said: "That's about right. It was just about one A. M. when Janathan got downstairs and found—"

O'Hanna cut in. "Let me worry about the time-table, Mrs. Kuhn, where are these documents Janathan wanted to buy?"

"Locked up in a bank vault, of course. Many of them are extremely old and fragile. Besides, I'm not fool enough to run around with priceless, irreplaceable papers in my handbag. Once was enough. I do have a catalog—"

O'Hanna interrupted. "Once was enough?"

Color died from Belle Kuhn's face, left her face the hue of over-exposed Kodachrome. She said: "We once lost part of the collection through carelessness. I was saying, Grandfather's collection is catalogued, but of course prices change. Roughly speaking, the value of a man's handwriting corresponds to his fame. But fame is fleeting, people are famous today and forgotten tomorrow—and vice versa, they're forgotten today and famous tomorrow—"

Johnny Taine giggled.



O'HANNA swung on his heel and left 431. Entering the elevator, he saw Lucas Kuhn shagging in pursuit. The house dick growled: "The hell with him, don't wait."

Nobody tried to lasso him as he plunged from the hotel doors across the darkened grounds.

He followed his flashlight until he heard the voices. By that time, he didn't need the flashlight. He could be guided by Eva Taine's window light.

Eva Taine's voice carried farthest, being shrill. It said: "No! You're insane! I didn't!"

The other's was a man's voice, low and threatening. "You killed him, girlie. But you didn't kill him dead enough! It was shock that dropped him, not death. He was still alive, and he regained consciousness, he got to his feet. He staggered out into the hall, and that's where I found him. He had breath enough left to moan out a name—your name."

From the sound of it, she was a very frightened girl. "He didn't mean I killed him. He couldn't have meant that."

There was the noise of a doorknob clicking.

The man said: "Think it over." He opened the door, and the light shone through his bowed legs. "Think it over good. 'Fourscore and seven years ago'—that's all I ask."

"You're crazy. It's gone. There were only a few charred pieces about as big as a postage stamp."

"Nuts," Professor Alexander Janathan said. "He showed it to me. Think that over, too."

He pulled the door shut and came down the chalet steps. His eyes gleamed like red hot coals. He was in too much of a hurry to notice O'Hanna in the darkness. O'Hanna was in too much of a hurry to stop him. O'Hanna fidgeted until he disappeared among the trees, then he ran up the chalet steps.

She hadn't locked the door, hadn't even stirred out of the chair where Janathan had left her twisting her hands. She didn't even look up as O'Hanna came in.

"I didn't kill him," the blonde said. "He didn't mean that."

O'Hanna said: "Fourscore and seven years ago—the original draft of the Gettysburg Address in Abraham Lincoln's handwriting. You can name your own price—you can even beat a murder rap with it."

Eva Taine stared through dazed, poker-chip eyes. "Who told you?"

"I picked it up in pieces. I'll let you put the pieces together. I've gathered Grandpa Taine collected rare old historical papers. You take it from there."

"He had the Gettysburg Address. It was in the briefcase—that day," the girl said. "It was blown up in the dynamiting. So you see, Janathan is just lying—"

"Not so fast. Why was it in the briefcase?"

"He was going to have it examined to make sure it was authentic."

"I don't remember reading that angle in the papers at the time," the house dick put in.

Eva Taine said: "It wasn't in the papers. Grandfather didn't tell anyone. He bought it for a few thousand dollars—five, I think. It was undoubtedly worth ten times that. In other words, there was something peculiar about the deal."

"It was hot?"

"I suppose it'd been stolen. Grandfather couldn't possibly get it back, and he didn't care to advertise his dealings with the thief."

"So he didn't tell the cops?"

"No."

O'Hanna said: "He just sent a big floral offering to the chauffeur's funeral? A great guy, Grandpa. I don't wonder he can't rest easy in his grave."

Eva Taine protested: "Oh, but Jacques was involved, too."

"Jacques was the chauffeur's name?"

"Yes. He had a police record. He was the what-do-you-call-it?—the contact man. It was

through him that Grandfather bought the Gettysburg Address. He told Grandfather he'd been approached by some man he'd known in prison."

O'Hanna pondered. "Lucas Kuhn. Where'd he fit in?"

"He had no motive for trying to kill Grandfather. He was only Grandpa's secretary at the time—that was before he married my sister Belle."

"And Oscar Mullet?"

"Mullet was our gardener then. I'm sure Grandfather never suspected him, either. Why, he named Mullet in his will."

"As the cat's caretaker. Why was that?"

Eva Taine said: "Because the kitten belonged to Mullet before Grandfather adopted it. And I suppose because Lochinvar would get the best of care so long as it paid Mullet about five thousand dollars a year to keep the cat alive."

O'Hanna shrugged. "The best of care won't keep a cat alive forever. Mullet was playing for bigger stakes, and playing for keeps—"

Chimes concealed in the hall closet went *tra-la-la*. The caller didn't wait for an answer. He threw the door open. It was Endicott, wild-eyed and quivering. The manager panted: "Mike, for God's sake, the ghoul's come back! I saw it myself! It tried to strangle me!"

CHAPTER THREE

The Ghoul Rush



ULL yourself together, man!" O'Hanna commanded the trembling, ashen-faced manager. "Where'd you see it?"

"In that chalet, you know, Mr. Kuhn's . . ."

The house dick stared.

"What were *you* doing in

Kuhn's chalet?"

"I got to thinking, Mike. You see, if there happened to be some bloodspots there, it'd prove Raymond was wrong about the time—"

"Playing detective. Butting into my department."

Shaken up and humbled, Endicott gestured helplessly. "Mike, I'm trying to tell you! The lights suddenly went out, and the thing came at me! It was ghastly—that white beard and those cold hands closing around my throat."

"Go on. What else?"

"I—I tore myself loose. I got to the window and fell—jumped out. I ran for my life."

O'Hanna said: "Come on." He led the way to Lucas Kuhn's chalet. Reaching the darkened building, the detective detoured to look under the bedroom window. An outline in the heavily dewed grass showed where Endicott had measured himself flat, footprints showed how he'd lit out a-running. There weren't any other

footprints. The ghoul had left by the front door and the path, or he was still inside.

O'Hanna swung around, and Endicott was ahead as they climbed the chalet steps. A lifetime of hotel training—never open a paying guest's door without knocking—made the manager automatically thumb the doorbell button.

Tra-la-la, the chimes inside pealed.

O'Hanna scoffed, "Hell, we don't have to be polite about—" and grunted as the memory and meaning hit him hard. "Hell's fire! It only chimed twice before!"

He punched the front door open, and felt for the inner wall switch. O'Hanna took two long steps, tugged at a doorknob.

Endicott said: "No, that's the coat closet. I was in the bedroom looking for a clue."

O'Hanna aimed his flashlight up, ringed it onto the triple-tubed door chime screwed high upon the wall. He intoned: "You looked in the wrong place, then. See here."

The arrangement was the usual one. Pressure on the outside button juiced a coil magnet. Magnetism lifted three small hammers, the lifted hammers broke the circuit, and then in series they fell. The first chime said *tra* when its hammer hit, the second said *la* a split second later, and the third had said nothing because something had been in the way. It was something that had left a dark, discolored streak along eight inches of the wall.

O'Hanna aimed the flashlight down, spread its beam over the floor. He crouched, wet the tip of his finger, picked up a particle of charred pasteboard.

Endicott gaped: "What on earth?"

"It's E C," vouchsafed O'Hanna.

"Easy?" Endicott blinked.

"Yeah. Easy if you know how, if you've ever dabbled in explosives." Then, abruptly: "Come on!"

He made for the main building and the front desk, Endicott trotting at heel. "Mrs. Kuhn's room number?" O'Hanna demanded of the room clerk. "K-u-h-n."

The clerk looked it up, or tried to. "I'm sorry, but we have no Mrs. Kuhn registered. There's a Mr. Kuhn in one of—"

"Wait. She's divorced, maybe she's using the name Belle Taine," the house dick said on second-thought.

This time he got it, number 434. She'd said a room across the hall from 431, but he had to be sure. He fed a passkey into the lock, turned it and the knob gently.

The red-haired woman had company. The visitor's voice flowed out as O'Hanna opened the door a slow inch.

"You killed him," the voice accused, "but you didn't kill him quite dead enough! He was still alive, and half an hour later he regained consciousness. He got to his feet and staggered out into the hall where I found him. He had

breath enough left to sob out a name—and the name was Belle!”

The house dick tugged the door shut. “Let’s pay the professor a call while he’s away from home,” he said to Endicott.

But there was nothing in 218—nothing, anyway, O’Hanna could turn up in five minutes’ searching.

He shrugged. “The corpse, then.”

The passkey fitted 207 the same as any other. The knob turned like any other knob. The difference was that this door still wouldn’t open because it was night-locked on the inside. O’Hanna piled his shoulder against the panel. It hurt his shoulder but it didn’t bother the door.

He cursed, tugged Lucas Kuhn’s .38 up out of his coat pocket.

Endicott moaned: “Mike you mustn’t! You’ll wake up the whole hotel!”

O’Hanna said, “He’s killed dead enough. Mullet sure as hell didn’t lock himself in here,” and jammed the muzzle to the panel. San Alpa’s night-lock bars were six inches above the key-lock, and he crashed two shots in there before he drew back and baled his shoulder against the panel again. The door gave.

Endicott blurted: “The window, look!”

A rope fed from the bedpost out over the window sill. It sagged so O’Hanna knew there was no weight sliding down the rope.

A false Santa Claus beard and another T-shaped flashgun lay spilled on the floor. O’Hanna dived past these objects to the bathroom door. He gulped, “Don’t look,” to Endicott.

Endicott had to look, of course, but he didn’t look long. The manager jumped back, squeezed his eyelids shut, and put his hand over his closed eyes. He gagged: “Mike, that’s horrible!”

O’Hanna said: “Yeah. Somebody performed a premature autopsy. The sheriff’s gonna be mad!”

SHERIFF Ed Gleeson was mad, hornet-stinging mad. He’d been a sergeant in World War I, and his sergeant’s bellow filled Endicott’s office as he glowered at the suspects gathered there. “It wasn’t enough to just kill the guy—you had to turn him inside out, huh?”

Lucas Kuhn said, “It’s *his* fault,” pointing a forefinger at O’Hanna. “I told him the killer had a rope. I told him I was lassoed, and he wouldn’t believe me!”

O’Hanna said sadly: “That’s right, Ed. He told me, and I wouldn’t believe it. But I think I know why the rope was used.”

Endicott supplied: “Certainly. The ghoul slid down it while we were breaking in the door.”

“It was used before that. Mullet wasn’t killed in 207—the killer couldn’t risk the shot being overheard. Mullet was taken for a walk, he was killed outside, but the murderer couldn’t carry a corpse back through the lobby. That body

was hauled up through 207’s window on the end of the rope.” O’Hanna leveled an Irish-gray stare at Professor Alexander Janathan. “It was a corpse, too, not a living man. I’ll prove Mullet never revived, never stumbled into the hall looking for help. He’d have rubbed the grass clippings off the soles of his shoes, had he gone stumbling around.”

Ed Gleeson advanced his jaw. “So Mullet wasn’t in the hall! Then how did you happen to find his dead body at all? Answer that!”

“I guess I’ll have to.” Janathan cleared his throat. “It all started ten days ago. This man Mullet approached me in my Los Angeles office. He claimed to have an exceedingly valuable historical document for sale—a first draft of the Gettysburg Address. It was his story that it hadn’t really been destroyed in the dynamiting after all. He said he’d found the briefcase almost uninjured after the explosion. Realizing its value, he hid the document. After that, he cut up the briefcase and sprinkled the pieces around where he found the thing.”

O’Hanna asked: “But you wouldn’t buy?”

“Hell, no. I’d never heard of such a first draft ever belonging to Colonel Taine. That’s why I opened negotiations with the family. I figured I could find out from them, under cover of pretending to want to buy the Catlin Papers.” He grinned. “They’re a close-mouthed lot, but tonight I got Johnny drunk enough to babble some secrets. So I went to Mullet’s room, found the door unlocked and the guy dead.”

O’Hanna nodded. “You assumed he’d been killed for that Gettysburg paper, that the murderer had the document. So you started making the rounds, you told everyone Mullet had come to and named them as the killer. Your theory was that the guilty person would buy your silence by surrendering the so-called sample of Lincoln’s handwriting.”

“So-called, did you say?”

“You’re not quite that dumb, Janathan. You knew the thing was a forgery. Eva told me the story—a bunco yarn any cop would smell a mile away. The technique never changes, always the sucker buys something cheap because it’s hot, and always it turns out to be a phony. And almost always the victim keeps his trap shut—he’s ashamed to admit his share in a crooked deal. The chauffeur peddled Grandfather Taine an ersatz historical document, figuring the old man would be ashamed to haul him into court. Of course, the colonel woke up—they always do when it’s too late—and decided to have the paper examined by an expert.”

Lucas Kuhn asked: “So the chauffeur tried to blow him sky-high, and killed himself in the process?”

O’Hanna said: “No. The chauffeur had a confederate—who’d have been hurt then, and could be hurt now if that phony came to light.

Five years isn't long enough for the Homicide and Bomb Squads to forget a case. The cops had nothing to work on before. Colonel Taine himself clammed up on the main clue. But given that forgery, they could dig in and find a suspect who was in stir when the chauffeur was, who served time for penmanship then, and maybe is wanted somewhere right now.

"For my money, the dynamiter didn't care whether he killed Grandfather Taine or not. He wanted to destroy the evidence, the fake Gettysburg Address, and he thought he had. But then Mullet turned up with it—and got killed so the evidence could be burned."

Uneasy-eyed, Gleeson asked: "Burned? Where does that leave us?"



MIKE O'HANNA got down to business. "We've still got the *modus operandi*, as the high-powered criminologists say. The killer wasn't satisfied just to bump off Mullet, he had to be smart and make it look as if Mullet got shot playing ghost."

"That's the part that doesn't make sense to me!" the sheriff growled.

"It made sense up to a point. Somebody tried to poison the caretaker's five thousand-dollar-a-year cat. Then a ghost played Grandpa Taine in Eva's bedroom. The same ghost put on a performance for Lucas Kuhn. If we'd found Mullet's body the next morning, we'd have had every reason to assume Kuhn plugged him, and the coroner's verdict would have been—it served Mullet right. Getting shot at is a chance ghosts have to take! And by that time, medical testimony couldn't set the time of death any closer than an hour or so.

"But," O'Hanna swung to Alexander Janathan, "you had to butt in and find the corpse too soon! And Doc Raymond had to pronounce the guy dead half an hour too early! The theory of justifiable homicide was no good. The killer had to think of something else, had to get busy and resurrect the ghost. He had two sets of whiskers and flash-guns, one that he planted with Mullet's body, the other he used in Eva Taine's chalet. He had to make it appear there was some mysterious party at work—"

The house dick paused. "Oh, the hell with this 'he' stuff. It was Kuhn, of course."

Lucas Kuhn's pink face turned to chartreuse. "You're accusing me? You're crazy—"

"I knew there'd be an argument the minute I named the name. O.K., I'll argue with you." The house dick dug into his pocket, came up with the .38. "Here's the give-away—you were too damned anxious to talk me into giving this back to you! That it matched the slug in Mullet's body was fine and dandy, so long as you could claim you fired at a prowler. The

same bit of ballistics wasn't so good when you had to pin it on somebody else. Unable to talk me out of the gat, you went to work on the corpse instead."

O'Hanna put the other hand into the other pocket. He said to Gleeson: "Here's what the guy was after." He opened his palm, showed a bloodstained pellet of lead. "It's lucky—I broke down the door before he finished turning the corpse inside out. I completed the autopsy for him, dug this slug out of Mullet's left lung. All we have to do is compare it with his gun, and it's clear who murdered the guy."

Lucas Kuhn exploded, "You dirty stinking rat! It's a Goddamned frame-up! You lying louse, you couldn't've found that slug in him because I already took—"

It took him that long to realize what he was saying. He stopped saying it.

Johnny Taine giggled for pure joy.

"Damn!" Lucas Kuhn said. "Get that tripe-brained hyena out of here, and I'll talk." He thought and waved a hand at his red-haired ex-wife. "Her, too."

Sheriff Gleeson turned and said: "All right, you two run along and—"

O'Hanna snapped, "Ed!" and jumped as Lucas Kuhn tugged a gun up from behind his belt buckle. O'Hanna still had the .38 in his fist, and he clipped it across Lucas Kuhn's jaw.

"Where in hell did that come from?" Gleeson asked.

"He's a two-gun man. He had this other gun loaded with an E C, blank powder cartridge and hooked up with his chalet door chime," O'Hanna said. "He knew Eva would holler for help. He'd left a plain trail to his own doorstep, and figured I couldn't help following it. Figured I'd press the button—and rush in when I heard the shot.

"He wasn't in bed, see? He was right there waiting in the hall—he jumped and barreled me as soon as I got through the door. Then he wheeled and ran back and pretended he'd been knocked down in the bedroom.

"You want to know why? Here's why. There was another trail planted from his window—but he had to hold me up so's to allow time for Mullet's imaginary escape with an imaginary bullet in him."

Ed Gleeson pointed and said: "What about that bullet you got in your hand there?"

"It's really from his gun. It's one of a pair I shot through the door."

Endicott said now: "Good heavens, Mike! You really were framing the man—"

"Shucks," said O'Hanna. "That was nothing. Just the regular San Alpa hotel service."

"Hotel service?" the manager gulped.

"Sure. The management is strictly responsible for stolen articles left in our care. The corpse was in our care, so I made good the loss," O'Hanna said modestly.

ALCOHOLICS

"I tell you I'm a private dick," Cellini Smith yelled. But Mr. Howard of *Howard's Alcoholic Cure* merely nodded and typed Cellini as a psychopathic inferior, as were most of the other "booze-who" in his streamlined booby hatch—Mr. Sprigley who made a dive back to Howard's every time he sobered up and took a good look at his wife, Ivy Collins who divided her time between drink and blackmail and Henry Fields whose life had been cut short by a razor—not neat, but plenty gaudy.



Sprigley shivered. "God I can't watch that any more! I'm getting out of here."

CHAPTER ONE

Bottoms Up

CELLINI SMITH carefully engineered his big friend toward the bar of the Kitty Klub. "Easy does it," he said. However, it was Cellini and not Duck-Eye Ryan who collided with two of the tables before they reached their destination.

Mario, who doubled as manager and bar-

tender, frowned at sight of them, and said, with undisguised disgust in his tone: "Oh, it's you again."

"That's what you tell me every time I come in here," Cellini Smith said. "Can't you find a different tune to blow?"

"Well, every time you come in here, it's you again," replied Mario not illogically.

Cellini scowled. "Suppose you set out two wholesome, nutritious glasses of whiskey for me and my friend. I will pay you for it, the owner of this dump will make a handsome

CALAMITOUS

By ROBERT REEVES

A Cellini Smith Novelette



The helpless bartender's face became a red jelly, his body a mass of torn flesh throbbing with pain.

profit, he'll be able to hire you for another week and everybody will be happy. When I want any chatty comments, witty limericks or soft-shoe routines I'll let you know."

Though the sibilants were slightly blurred, Cellini delivered each word with the extreme care and precision of a drunk trying to maintain an appearance of sobriety. He fooled nobody.

The barkeep plied his trade but continued to grumble. "Sure if that's all you wanted. But you always look for trouble. Like Mrs. Madigan's thigh the other day."

"It was not I but Mrs. Madigan's thigh that was looking for trouble."

Mario set out two glasses. "Sure. It spoke to you."

"It shouldn't be so obscenely fat and it shouldn't have sat down next to me."

"That still don't give you no call to pinch it. We try to keep this a family place."

"I have no family," Cellini observed. "I just have Duck-Eye Ryan."

Duck-Eye Ryan downed the contents of his glass and his large moon-face beamed at Cellini vacuously.

"Mr. Madigan heard about it," the bartender pursued. "He was simply furious. We nearly barred you from the Kitty Klub."

Cellini Smith said: "Shut up."

They had three more drinks and Duck-Eye said: "This is heaven. Can I have more?"

"Sure. I told you there's no limit."

"You're wonderful to me, Cellini." The dull, round eyes suddenly grew misty. "I stink, Cellini." The mist coagulated into twin tear drops in the outside corners of each eye.

"Stop bawling and get that drink down."

Duck-Eye's lips trembled and his hands rubbed his boxing-ring scarred face. "I'm just a lousy has-been—"

Cellini nodded agreement.

"—but you treat me like I still rated a semi-final, like I was on top of the heap." Duck-Eye Ryan's head fell forward on his arms and he began to sob into the bar.

Cellini regarded him with disgust and ordered more drinks. After a while the sobs ceased but Duck-Eye's head did not raise. Cellini shook the massive shoulders but there was no response. Duck-Eye had passed out.

Mario nodded toward Duck-Eye Ryan. "What gives with the goon?"

"Duck-Eye couldn't take it," Cellini replied. "He passed out. A hell of a bodyguard!" he muttered to himself.

"You've been at it three days," said Mario. "I wonder *you* don't pass out."

"Four days," corrected Cellini Smith. "Today is Friday."

"It's no good for you," moralized the bartender. "Why don't you give up and go home to sleep?"

"I got a shecret shorrow." Cellini stood up, holding on to the bar for support. "Looking for a fight?"

Mario waved him back to the stool. "All right. Cool off and watch the floor show."

Tanya's going to sing so shut up and listen."

Cellini drank and watched Tanya sing. When she had finished he yelled: "Boo!" A bouncer put a quieting finger to his lips. An accordion duet took the stage and this time Cellini didn't wait for the end to indicate his displeasure. The bouncer left his station and came toward Cellini.

"You shouldn't do that, mister," he said pleasantly. "Just don't applaud if you don't like them."

Cellini decided that he was living in a democracy and no one could tell him what to do. He drained his glass and then threw it at the bouncer. It went wide by over three yards and smashed into an array of bottles behind the bar.

"Now," said Mario, "you're really going to have a secret sorrow."

The bouncer slid in expertly. Cellini let loose a punch, missing him completely but hitting a patron on the adjoining stool. The bouncer caught him by the left wrist and pulled back sharply, neatly depositing Cellini over his shoulder. Then, as if carrying a sack of potatoes, he walked out unhurriedly and into the manager's office where he dropped his inert burden on a sofa.

Mario, who had followed, said: "I hope he doesn't get sick in here."

"Not this one. His plumbing is zinc-lined."

"I shouldn't have let him have that last couple."

The bouncer nodded. "I been keeping my eye on him the last few days. Guess I'll call a cop." He left.

CELLINI slowly stirred and sat up. He realized that the thing on the table in front of him was a fifth of brandy. He tilted the bottle to his lips and, after taking a long swig, began to sing *I Got Sixpence*. Mario slapped him over the face and took away the bottle. Cellini beamed and continued to sing.

He was still singing when the bouncer returned with a policeman. Obviously bored, the cop listened to the story.

"I hate to do this," Mario concluded. "It's no good for our reputation to arrest customers."

"Then what do you want me for?" asked the cop.

"On the other hand, I don't want them to get the idea they can come in here and rough up the place."

Cellini suddenly lunged for the brandy bottle, which was now on a bookcase, and fell flat on his face. The cop nudged him with a shoe and Cellini mumbled something that sounded like: "I wanna sleep. Lemme alone."

"If you don't want to charge him with nothing," said the cop, "why don't you keep him here overnight?"

"He'll only wake up in the morning and start all over again."

"That's right," the bouncer agreed. "The guy's on a perpetual binge and he'll be in looking for trouble again."

"I just don't want him around here and he'll head back as soon as he starts drinking. I've tried kicking him out before but he gets tough and it's bad for business." Mario snapped his fingers. "Say, maybe we can talk him into going on the wagon. If we can get him to take that alcoholic cure, he'll be out of circulation for a few weeks."

"Do what you want," said the cop, "but get it over with."

Mario bent over Cellini. "We'll give you a break, brother. You can either take the cure or you can go to jail. Which will it be?"

"I wanna drink," came the voice from the carpet.

Mario straightened up. "He'll take the cure. It'll be more comfortable than spending the same time in jail."

"As long as he agrees, it's no skin off my badge," said the cop and added suggestively: "Kind of cool out tonight."

Mario indicated the brandy bottle, said, "Try that fuel oil," consulted the telephone directory and made a call.

The cop had left when, some twenty minutes later, two competent-looking young men entered the office of the Kitty Klub. The initials, H.A.C., on their white jackets, stood for *Howard's Alcoholic Cure*.

They looked down at Cellini and the blond one asked: "Does he get mean?"

"A little," nodded Mario, "but he's not likely to come to for ten or twelve hours."

The blond one asked some more questions and then he and his companion hauled Cellini up by the armpits and dragged him out. The way led through the kitchen and out the rear door where a private ambulance was parked. After they had tossed Cellini on a rubber-sheeted litter inside the car, the two attendants locked the door and went back to the Kitty Klub.

They returned in a little while and looked in on Cellini. He was breathing heavily and one of them loosened his collar. The other took out Cellini's wallet, found an identification card and announced: "The guy's name is Cellini Smith."

While returning the wallet, he deftly palmed a five-dollar bill by way of a self-given tip and then the two of them got into the front of the car.

The ambulance headed for Hollywood Boulevard and then turned into one of the winding grades that lead up into the hills. The blond one looked back through the panel of glass into the interior of the car and saw that Cellini had rolled off the litter onto the floor. They continued to climb for another five minutes, turning into a side road which finally led to a gate

with bronze lettering that read, simply: HOWARD'S.

The driver touched his horn lightly and the gate swung back, giving them access to the grounds which were completely enclosed by a seven-foot cement wall. When they had reached the sanitarium building, the attendants stepped from the car and hauled the still inert Cellini from the rear. They carried their burden inside and stopped in the hallway when a figure approached them.

"Who have you there, Freddy?"

"Another stew, Mr. Howard," the blond one said.

"I can smell him from here. Who is he?"

"His name's Cellini Smith."

"A Smith again?" said Howard. "Well, I don't care what they call themselves. Where did you find Smith?"

"We picked him up at the Kitty Klub where he passed out," Freddy replied. "We checked and it looks like he's been on a binge for some time."

"All right. C-32 is vacant." Howard walked away.

The attendants carried Cellini around a bend in the corridor, opened a door and dropped him on a bed.

"Undress him?" asked one.

"He'd never know the difference," said the other and they left.

The room was completely dark and silent. From far away came the muted wailing of a dog but nothing could be heard from within the house. Ten maddeningly long minutes passed as Cellini lay, unmoving, on the bed. Then a hand quietly reached down and began unlacing a shoe.

Carefully, he placed the shoe on the floor. He had heard nothing but he thought there was an off-chance that the two lads in white were still lingering in the corridor. The other shoe went beside the first, then he eased himself off the bed without a sound and stood up.

Fully sober, his eyes took in the quarter-moon through the barred window. He looked around, identifying the various shapes in the room, and then moved for the door.

CHAPTER TWO

The Nut Club



CELLINI SMITH stepped into the corridor and shut the door behind him. It all seemed too simple but then Howard probably didn't mind having his patients wander around the building. It would no doubt be another matter to get out the front door, past the guards, over the wall into the world again.

Cellini wondered about the time and checked his watch. Just 12:30. It seemed to him that his drunk act had taken longer. He wondered, also, which way to go and finally decided to turn right. There were probably more rooms down that way since the attendants had taken, by actual count, exactly sixty-two steps after bringing him in. On a purely percentage basis, the odds were that Henry Fields was located somewhere deeper in the building. If, thought Cellini glumly, Fields was in the building at all.

Quietly, Cellini moved down the hallway, then suddenly flattened himself against the wall. A white shape was approaching from around a bend in the corridor. It was a young, severe-faced nurse wearing the uniform of her profession. Cellini's mind raced to invent a story to explain his presence there for she could hardly miss seeing him.

Looking neither to right nor to left, the nurse swept by.

Cellini waited but she did not turn around. Something was wrong for he knew beyond a shadow of any doubt that she had seen him. Cellini didn't like it. He would have preferred an argument. Perhaps she didn't talk to strange men.

He continued on his way, passing several doors, and finally stopped in front of one showing a slit of light above the saddle. Henry Fields would certainly be awake and this would be as good a place as any to start. Without knocking, he entered.

It was a room similar to his own and sprawled on the bed, reading a mystery book, was a middle-aged, genial-faced man.

"Beg pardon," said Cellini. "Wrong pew."

The stranger sat up. "Come right in. Always glad to meet a fellow dipsomaniac. I'm Tom Sprigley."

Cellini took the proffered hand and supplied his own name. He asked: "Do they let you stay up all night in this joint?"

"Only if they feel like it, Smith. Why?"

"They operate in a queer way around here."

"You just don't recognize that you're in a classy place, my friend. There's no such thing as a padded cell here. It's called a detention room."

"It's still queer. A nurse just passed six inches from me in the hallway and she went right by without a word."

"That's Banks," said Sprigley. "Miss Banks is the only woman between sixteen and sixty I've never wanted to kiss."

"What's wrong?" asked Cellini. "Isn't she alive?"

"They don't have to be alive for me. It's only that she's gone overboard on the Florence Nightingale stuff. I don't want anybody to feel that sorry for me. I just want to drink."

"How come she didn't say anything to me?"

Sprigley laughed. "You were lucky. If you

think she didn't know you ought to be in bed you're mistaken. They know pretty well everything that goes on."

"You seem to have been here a long time. Are you a permanent guest?"

"On and off," Sprigley replied. "Whenever I sober up and take a look at my wife, I run here to Howard's. How about a few quick hands of pinochle?"

"Thanks but I've got no vices. I'm perfect." Cellini waved a farewell.

"Come on, Smith," Tom Sprigley coaxed. "I promise to lose."

"Maybe later." Cellini stepped into the corridor again and continued on his way. It was nearly one in the morning and Henry Fields still had to be found. He heard a rustle of linen behind him and turned to see Miss Banks.

This time she stopped and asked: "You're new here, aren't you?" The colorless voice matched her appearance.

"Yes."

"Well, you'll find it in the pantry down there."

"What will I find there?"

"Liquor." The word was spat out like a tainted oyster.

"I get it," said Cellini. "The hair of the dog that bit me."

The gray eyes, set in a face that could have been pretty, studied him. "No. It's simply that we want you to realize your position while undergoing treatment. An alcoholic needs his drink to face reality. It's a crutch."

"That's fine, Miss Banks. And you say I can find my liquid crutch in the pantry?"

"Yes. Down there."

He had no choice but to go the way she indicated.

WHEN Cellini Smith reached the pantry he found someone already there. It was a woman, crowding thirty, who was the complete antithesis of Miss Banks. The wise, somewhat shopworn though attractive face was overpainted and the figure was full-blown. Automatically, she mixed a drink from a bottle labeled *Blended Whiskey* and handed it to him.

"They cut it fifty per cent," she said, "but that's one better than forty-nine. Don't they wear shoes where you come from?"

"What are shoes?" Cellini accepted the drink. "Thanks. Who are you?"

"Ivy Collins. They put cigarettes out on me. Do you think I'm better off dead?"

"Maybe. I couldn't say."

Ivy Collins opened the wrapper she wore and modeled the black negligee underneath.

"You're better off this way," said Cellini sincerely. "Who claims otherwise?"

"That Banks dame." Moodily, Ivy stirred her drink. "I bet she even rides her broom side-saddle."

"Do you know someone called Henry Fields around here?"

"What's it to you?" snapped Ivy Collins.

"Very little," said Cellini, taken aback. "I heard he's here and I happen to know him."

"Oh. I thought you might be a detective or something." She grinned and Cellini suddenly realized that she was as drunk as one can possibly be and still remain vertical.

"Would my being a detective be good or bad?"

"Bad. It would mean that Henry was trying to pin things on me with my boy-friend. If you get what I mean," she finished lamely.

"And you like your boy-friend?" Cellini prompted.

"I can't stand him. He ought to get together with Banks. He says that women who drink are the bane of humanity. That's why he sends me here every few months."

"Then how come he's your boy-friend?"

"He loves me for what I am, not for what I drink. And I love him for his money. Sometimes I think it would be better to get back to the runway."

The pantry door swung open and Tom Sprigley entered.

"Ah, so you've met our star boarder, Smith. I don't blame you for ducking the pinochle."

"I'm looking for someone called Henry Fields. Know him?"

"Good friend of mine, though I don't usually go for the worrying kind."

Ivy finished mixing three more drinks and distributed the glasses. She raised hers for a toast.

"Here's to the next one to die."

Cellini said: "If he's such a good friend, you might tell me where his room is."

"Sixth door down the hall to the right."

The ceiling light suddenly blinked off and on three times in rapid succession.

"Oh, oh," said Ivy. "I guess they want us out of here."

Cellini stopped by the doorway. "What did you mean about Henry Fields being the worrying kind?"

"He's got troubles," Sprigley replied, "and he never lets you forget them. But," he added slyly, "why don't you ask Ivy? She knows him much better than I do."

The door to Henry Fields' room was open and Cellini Smith eased himself inside and shut it behind him.

A voice said: "Drop your gun and raise your hands."

"I haven't got a gun, my hands are raised and my name is Cellini Smith."

"You're lying!" snapped the testy voice from the blackness of the room. "Cellini Smith was here yesterday. I'll give you three seconds to get out before I shoot."

Cellini looked at the weak shaft of moonlight

forcing itself through the window. The odds on the owner of the voice missing him in that darkness were worth taking. Hoping that this room was identical with his, Cellini suddenly grabbed for the wall switch and simultaneously dropped to the floor.

There was no explosion of any bullet in the light that flooded the room. Only silence, as Cellini slowly stood up. From a photograph he had seen, he recognized the man who was huddled under the bedclothes as Henry Fields.

Cellini sat down on a chair beside the bed and lit a cigarette. He said: "Never give anyone three seconds. Especially if you haven't got a gun."

"What do you want?"

"I'm here to find out what you want," Cellini countered. He took an envelope from his pocket and tossed it on the bed.

Fields picked up the envelope and fumbled for the letter inside. "How did you get this?"

"From you through the mail with a hundred-dollar check which I've already cashed."

Doubt appeared on Fields' face. "If you're Smith, who was the other person?"

"I wouldn't know."

"But his business card—"

"I'm not carrying identification because I was afraid I might be searched but for two bucks I can get cards printed saying I'm the Andrews Sisters. How did this other guy get in here?"

"As a visitor. They don't let me have any so he came ostensibly to visit a girl I know here and I managed to get a few minutes alone with him."

"I suppose you told him your whole story."

"Of course."

"Well, you might as well repeat it to me now."

Fields regarded him with baleful eyes. "I'm still not sure he wasn't Cellini Smith and that you're not the phony."



HERE followed a strained silence and then Cellini said: "Think it over like a bright business executive, Fields, and tell me what earthly difference it makes whether or not I'm a phony."

"Smith, even if you're no fake I don't like your attitude."

"It'll have to do till the war's over. Apparently you're no intellectual giant, Fields, so listen carefully while I try to explain. You're in some sort of jam and you wrote one Cellini Smith to do something for you. Is that right?"

Henry Fields nodded.

"Obviously someone else doesn't want you to get that thing done, otherwise you wouldn't be locked up here and you wouldn't have to call in a private operative. Now this other per-

son also knows what you want done. Isn't that so?"

"Naturally."

"Fine. Now put away your yo-yo and listen. This other person sent someone here to masquerade as Cellini Smith and fool you. If your visitor was the real Smith then he's doing what you asked him. In that case, it won't hurt to tell me the story because if I'm with the other side I already know it. If, on the other hand, your visitor was a phony then he's doing nothing in your interests. In that case, I'm the real thing so, again, you should tell me the story."

Fields considered it and then said reluctantly: "Very well. I suppose you know who I am and about my job."

"Yes, I checked all that."

"What you probably couldn't check was the financial standing of the firm for which I work. It's so good that at a secret board meeting a few weeks ago we decided to cut our shares four ways. That means that we will take in the outstanding shares of stock and return four for each one."

"And," Cellini noted, "make a fortune for whoever owns stock in the outfit."

"That's right. Each share is paying two and a half dollars quarterly interest and that will continue after the split. Naturally, I did something about it."

"You bought a large block?"

"No, I couldn't take a chance on the firm changing its mind about the four-way split so I went to a call broker and reserved five thousand shares to be called for within thirty days. I don't know if you understand how a put and call broker operates but it's something like a real estate dealer. You can put down a small sum of money which gives you the option to buy a piece of land within a certain period. If you decide not to buy, you lose your deposit but if you decide to go through the broker has to deliver at the original price. It's the same way with a call broker and shares of stock."

"I'm with you," said Cellini, "but who started pitching a curve?"

Fields' voice was bitter. "I wish I knew. Everything went smoothly and by way of celebrating all the the money I'd make on the deal, I went on a drinking bout. As I wrote you—if you really are Smith—I went to the Kitty Klub and woke up here. I seem to have signed some kind of paper which gives Howard the right to do what he wants."

"How much time," asked Cellini Smith, "do you have in which to exercise your option?"

"Very little. If I don't get in touch with Byron and Keever by noon this Monday, they will no longer hold the shares for me and I'll forfeit my original call deposit."

"That's plenty of time," said Cellini.

"Don't be naive, Mr. Smith! If it were so easy don't you think I would have found a way to

do it the past three weeks? I can't write or even use a phone—let alone think of getting out of here and to my brokers by then."

"How true," said Cellini absently. He stared at the end of his cigarette for a while, then asked: "This visitor you had, did he come to visit Ivy Collins?"

"Yes. How do you know her?"

"I just picked a name at random. What gives between you and Ivy? The old urge?"

"What of it?" demanded Henry Fields. "I've been locked up in this prison for over three weeks and—"

"I'm proud of you," Cellini said, "but my only interest in Ivy is whether or not she knew that the visitor she passed on to you was a phony. Has she been making trouble?"

"She's been trying some blackmail but I'm not worried."

"If you're not, maybe she is. How about Howard? Is he friend or foe?"

"He a friend? He's locked me up here and—"

"All right." Cellini stood up. "Stick around. I'll be back."

"Where are you going?"

Cellini didn't answer. He was headed for Howard's office to check the files and see if Henry Fields was lying about not being able to leave the place, to learn if there was a visitors' list and, if so, to find out who had visited Ivy, posing as Cellini Smith. A volley of questions and protests still poured from Fields as Cellini again stepped into the corridor.

There was neither light nor noise from the pantry as he walked by. Tom Sprigley and Ivy Collins must have left for their respective rooms—or maybe not so respective. He kept going toward the front of the building and finally stopped by a pair of curtained, glass doors. This looked like the place. He tried the door-knob, found that it turned and eased himself inside.

He could make out the shadowy shapes of desks and filing cabinets. He regretted kicking out a traveling salesman who had tried to sell him a pencil flashlight a few weeks before and made for a desk lamp. Suddenly he stopped. Someone else had entered the room. The newcomer seemed to slide along the wall and then the ceiling lights snapped on.

It was Freddy, the blond one.

"At which corner," asked Cellini, "does the trolley stop?"

"So you sobered up, eh?" Freddy walked over and clamped a hand on Cellini's shoulder. A paralyzing thumb dug into the side of his neck.

Cellini remembered the rough way in which Freddy had thrown him into the ambulance. Without hunting for a better reason, he pulled back and hit the orderly in the stomach. Freddy fell down, rolled over and began to be sick on Mr. Howard's carpeting.

Out of the corner of his eye, Cellini caught sight of movement behind him. He had no time to turn, or duck or even move—only to curse himself for forgetting that these boys traveled in pairs. Then something caught him on the back of his head and he joined Freddy on the floor.

CHAPTER THREE

Dead Drunk



PORTING what he probably called a smoking jacket, Howard drummed on the desk top waiting to speak until he was sure that Cellini would understand.

"Mr. Smith," he said finally, "you are not to hit members of my staff."

Cellini slowly sat up straight on the divan. "Why not?" he asked.

"That is not why they are here."

"Then tell them to keep their hands off me. Besides," said Cellini, remembering, "one of your goons knocked me out from behind. If that's the way you cure people, I'll stick to the disease."

"We only use force when necessary, Mr. Smith. Alcoholism cannot be beaten out of existence. What were you doing in my office?"

"Looking for a drink."

"Miss Banks told you it could be found in the pantry."

Efficient reporting, Cellini noted and said: "That stuff is so cut it tastes like the Gordian knot. I was looking for your private stock."

"I have no private stock, Mr. Smith, and if I had it would be private."

"I feel like a poor relation in a charity home."

"This is not a charitable institution. You'll learn that when you get our bill." Howard picked up a printed sheet from his desk. "While we're on the subject, you might as well sign this."

Cellini glanced over the fine printing. "It seems to give you the power to do a great deal."

"Certainly, Mr. Smith. It's merely substituting my will-power for yours because if you had any you wouldn't be here."

Cellini picked up a pen and signed. "If I had any sense I wouldn't be here."

"This is not a joking matter," said Howard. "You are already at the point where alcohol has become a narcotic instead of just a pleasant social lubricant."

"Suppose your cure doesn't work?"

"Its success will depend on you. It has worked in many difficult cases, as with Miss Banks who was once a patient here. We can supply occupational therapy, healthful exercise, good food and give you a better understanding of the dangers of alcoholism. However, all our med-

ical, psychological and re-educational treatment is useless unless you cooperate."

Cellini nodded absently. It was time to get back to Henry Fields and ask more questions. He said: "I guess I'll return to my cell for some sleep."

"Fine, Mr. Smith. I'll send Miss Banks along with a glass of warm milk."

"That will be peachy."

Cellini left with an acute feeling of dissatisfaction. Howard seemed to be too smooth an article. People who had something to conceal neither talked nor acted with such frankness and ease. It required a lot of self confidence to refrain from asking, for example, why Cellini was walking around in his stocking feet. And if Howard had nothing to conceal, then the supposed plot against Henry Fields was nonexistent.

Cellini opened the door to Fields' room and entered. The lights were off and he could hear no sound.

"This is Smith. Are you awake?"

There was no answer and he turned on the ceiling lights. The bed was empty and the pillow lay on the floor beside it. Cellini took two more steps forward before he saw the red, oozing liquid that was forcing its way out of the semi-open bathroom door.

Carefully, Cellini Smith stepped over the puddle of blood. Henry Fields, clad in pajamas, lay dead on the tile floor—so obviously dead that further verification would have been pointless.

The blood which had splattered over wall and glass and tile came from a severed artery in the dead man's right wrist. The straight-edged razor, which had done the job, lay in the bathtub. Perhaps not neat but very efficient and plenty gaudy. The stopper was in the wash basin and it was nearly full with red-tinged water. Cellini dipped his hand into it and found it was luke warm.

Suicide?

All the elements were there. It was a classic method of killing oneself. The keen-edged razor—a swift stroke over the artery—and then plunge the arm into the basin of warm water to ease any pain.

In addition, Henry Fields had been psychologically ripe for such a deal. All suicides by relatively sane people are born of despair. It must have been a shock for Fields to discover that his previous visitor had not been a detective, that no one was working in his cause. Ample reason for hopeless despair.

Still Cellini hesitated. True, the elements were all there but they could add up to anything. He bent over to see if there were any further marks on the body. The vague, reddish band around the left wrist was probably from a wrist watch. However, the welt over the right temple, just below the hairline, was a

different matter. It could have come from hitting the edge of the bathtub when Fields fell unconscious. Or it could have come from a blow delivered by some visitor.

Cellini returned to the bedroom. Nothing seemed disturbed or missing. The dead man's wallet and pockets held the usual collection. But no receipt, no piece of paper or anything else that seemed to have any connection with stocks or brokers.

There was little to do but try Howard's office again and see what the files on Fields contained. Cellini turned off the lights and went out into the hallway.

"Mr. Smith! I thought you were supposed to be going to bed." It was Miss Banks carrying the glass of milk.

"I've been busy examining a corpse."

"After you've stayed a while you'll learn I have no sense of humor. I'll take you to your room. You shouldn't be running around the corridors."

Cellini followed meekly. Above all, he didn't want her to report to Howard.

At the door to his room, Cellini said: "Good-bye, we must do this again some time."

She swept by him and entered. "Don't be silly. I want to see you safely asleep. You'll find pajamas, tooth brush and anything you want in there."

"Look, Miss Banks. I'm a grown boy now. I shave twice a month."

Coldly, she said: "If you're modest, you can go in the bathroom. If you're insubordinate, I'll call for help."

Cellini changed into pajamas and crawled into bed. He would have to wait for her to leave before starting out again. She sat on the edge of the bed and handed him the milk which he drank with distaste.

He asked: "Aren't you afraid to be alone with a man like me?"

"No, Mr. Smith. Chronic inebriates are not interested in women."

"That guy Sprigley is interested and he seems as chronic as they make them."

"He hasn't been here long enough for me to find out. Please finish the milk."

"How long have you been here?"

"A few years."

"And no stew has ever"—he hunted for the proper euphemism and continued—"made advances toward you?"

"Certainly not." Her cold fingers began stroking his forehead. "You must try to sleep now."

"How about Henry Fields?"

The fingers seemed to press harder. "That poor man should be put out of his misery. He worries so."

"That's interesting. I didn't know that mercy killing was a house specialty."

"Euthanasia?" she said. "Why not? It would

be a mercy to society, let alone to him. Alcoholic insanity accounts for about five per cent of all hospital cases."

"But would you put Fields out of the way if you had the opportunity?"

She said something in reply but he did not hear her. An overwhelming urge to sleep had come over him. Through the drowsiness that swept over him he understood the cause.

"Damn it, you put veronal in the milk."

He made out the words: "Not veronal . . . sedative . . . sleep . . ." A hand pressed against his chest, preventing him from rising. She was stronger than he had supposed. Strong enough to drag a body around. The cold fingers still stroked his forehead.

SOMEONE had hold of Cellini Smith's shoulders and was shaking him violently.

"Wake up! What's the matter with you?"

Reluctantly, Cellini opened his eyes. For a full thirty seconds, he stared at the anxious face above him, trying to recognize the features. Then he remembered that they belonged to Tom Sprigley and he sat upright.

"Well, it's about time," Sprigley said. "Do you realize it's after two o'clock?"

"What about it?"

"You'd better decide what to say to the cops."

"I'm just deciding what to say to Miss Banks." Cellini frowned. "What is this cops routine you're giving out with?"

"Henry Fields killed himself last night and the cops are going around talking to everybody. You asked about Fields last night in front of me and Ivy Collins. What I want to know is whether we should mention it to the police?"

"It doesn't make much difference, does it?"

"Probably not, Smith. They'll just bother you with a lot of extra questions. That's all."

"In that case, let's forget about it."

Sprigley winked. "O.K. I'll pass the good word on to Ivy." He stopped by the door. "Do you think Fields might have killed himself because Ivy got out of hand? A fit of depression and that kind of stuff?"

"Could be."

While Cellini shaved and showered he tried to decide what to do. The paramount fact was that there was no longer any money in it. His client was dead. And along with his death went the answers to a lot of questions.

Cellini stopped scrubbing. Perhaps there

would be some money in this. In any event, it would be worth trying.

Fully clothed, Cellini stepped outside. The subdued voices and the sober faces of those who passed were familiar. He knew from experience that they had already heard of Henry Fields' death. He stopped an orderly and was shown to the dining room where he was fed breakfast.

Someone said: "Did you hear—"

Cellini said: "I heard."

After breakfast, he was led to a small projection room and shown a film depicting the perils of drink which gave a somewhat detailed picture of how the body's various organs reacted to alcohol. When it was over, Miss Banks came in and led him out to the grounds.

"The next time," said Cellini, "you want me to drink milk, you'll have to bring the cow over and let me draw it myself."

"It's for your own good," she replied. "You will stay out here till called for."

This seemed to be the sunning hour, for most of the patients were outside, strolling about or sitting on garden furniture. At the far end, he recognized the bulky form of Detective-Sergeant Ira Haenigson, of Homicide, questioning somebody. Ivy Collins was talking to a middle-aged man encased in tweeds and Cellini walked over.

"Mr. Smith, I want you to meet Larry Coomb." Hastily, she added: "My fiancé."

Coomb pointed his sharp nose at Cellini like a bird dog and slapped a trouser leg with the gloves he carried. He did not offer to shake hands.

Cellini asked: "Hear about Henry Fields being dead?"

"Good riddance," said Larry Coomb.

"Why, because he made a pass at Ivy?"

The nose seemed to leap up and the pair of gloves slapped Cellini across the mouth.

"I'm getting tired of all this," said Cellini. "Very sick and very tired." His left hand closed around Coomb's throat and his other grabbed the gloves. "Now open your mouth."

Coomb pawed the air and fell to one knee. As his mouth opened, Cellini stuffed the gloves between his teeth and then pushed him roughly aside.

Ivy Collins let out a slight giggle that turned into raucous laughter. Unable to speak, she pointed. Four of Howard's henchmen were converging on him.

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HE attendants respectfully led Cellini into Howard's office. The owner sat behind his desk, frowning.

"Mr. Smith, I don't know what to do with you."

"Why don't you try penicillin?"

"The reason for your alcoholism, I would say, is that you're a psychopathic inferior and the only way you can express yourself is by unleashing aggressive behavior."

"It's really nothing," said Cellini modestly.

"I wouldn't mind it if you weren't a troublemaker. You've broken into my private office twice."

"Once."

"I know better," snapped Howard.

"It was still once."

"Last night one of my men walked by here and heard someone putting the receiver back on the telephone. When he entered, it was dark and the intruder got away. That's why he was waiting for you the second time you returned. You have no business making phone calls or coming here without permission."

"Go on."

"Then you hit Freddy and he became sick all over my carpet. Today you attacked Mr. Coomb, a guest of Miss Collins."

"It was a pleasure. Tell me, was this Coomb character here last night?"

"Yes, he came in late and stayed at the guest house but that is none of your concern. I'm trying to decide the treatment for you. I could give you the usual harmless medicines which create acute discomfort for the patient and tend to cause abstinence so that he won't be subjected to the medicine again. But you're too intelligent to be taken in with that sort of thing."

"I certainly won't take milk again."

"You'll take what we give you," Howard said. "You're in our care and we can be stern if necessary. We intend to cure you whether you like it or not."

"All right," said Cellini. "Let's cut out the comedy. You know who I am, don't you?"

"Yes, I do."

"Then you know I'm a private operative?" Howard nodded.

"Fine—so I'm not interested in getting cured of anything, but I am interested in Fields who was my client."

Again, Howard nodded.

"Now that that's understood, I want you to do a few things for me."

"The police are already investigating Fields' death."

"I don't get along too well with them," Cellini said. "I want access to your files on Fields and also a list of the visitors Ivy Collins has

had the last few days. Also, pass the word around to your staff and patients that they would do well to answer my questions."

Howard tugged at an earlobe. "Surely, Mr. Smith. Is that all?"

"I'll let you know if I want something else."

"Good. Now suppose you go to your room and rest for a while."

Cellini stared at him.

"You see, Mr. Smith, I've already been warned about this obsession of yours that you are a private detective. It seems that you are sicker than I thought."

Cellini gripped his knees and tried to speak calmly. "There's a man from Homicide outside called Haenigson. Call him in and ask him."

"Very well." Howard flipped a button and spoke a few words into the telephone. They sat silently, watching each other until Haenigson appeared.

Howard asked: "Is this man a private detective?"

Haenigson looked. "I never saw him before in my life," he said blandly and left.

Cellini felt a curious tingle come over him. "I tell you I'm a private dick!"

"Yes, of course." Howard pressed a buzzer on his desk. "You will please go to your quarters now and rest. You will find it more comfortable than a detention room."

Several attendants filed into the office. The rage within Cellini burst out suddenly and violently. Blindly, he began hitting out on all sides. He still hit and struggled as the weight of five large men bore him to the floor and he was dragged out.

CHAPTER FOUR

Dipso-Facto



STRETCHED out on the bed, Cellini stared at the ceiling with a hard, expressionless face. He tried not to think, tried not to remember, tried only to concentrate on a black spot in the ceiling's corner. He did not move when he heard the key turn in the lock and someone entered.

"Now we can talk, Smith." It was Ira Haenigson.

"I thought you didn't know me."

"I was playing your game. How could I guess what you were up to with Howard?"

It sounded reasonable. Cellini said: "It's no game. Someone told him I'm cracked and that I imagine I'm a detective. At least, that's Howard's story."

"We'll get to him later," said Haenigson. "What about Fields?"

"The suicide? I've been hearing rumors. I wish you'd tell me about it."

The detective-sergeant said to the chest of drawers: "He's been hearing rumors. He wants me to tell him about it. He just came here to read the papers."

Cellini was forming a reply that was short and to the point when he remembered his mistake. A stupid, amateurish mistake. His prints were all over the dead man's room and if Haenigson didn't already know it, he would in a few hours.

Cellini turned away from the ceiling and said: "I have no interest in this thing other than being mad because my client is dead. But I'm real mad. As they say in cross-word puzzles, I'm irate and I'll level with you if you do the same with me."

"I'll listen."

"A few days ago I received a letter from Henry Fields with a hundred-dollar retainer. It said he had been shanghaied from the Kitty Klub and brought here and he wanted me to do a job because he couldn't get out."

"Why did he pick on you?"

"The phone book, I suppose. We'll never know. He couldn't have visitors so I came here the hard way through the Kitty Klub. It looks as if they shill for Howard."

Ira Haenigson shrugged. "I'm interested in homicide."

"You ought to try being interested just in crime some time. I managed to see Fields last night. He told me that the outfit he worked for is cutting its shares four ways so he went to a call broker and took an option on a large block of shares. The next thing he knew, he was stuck in here, getting cured of alcoholism."

"What did he want from you?"

"He wanted someone to pick up the option on the shares before it lapsed. I figured this place was pitching a curve since they kept such close tabs on him so I went to case Howard's office. When I got back, Fields had committed suicide."

A short, mocking laugh escaped the detective-sergeant. "You know better."

"You caught the wrist watch? You're getting brighter, Haenigson. Unfortunately, we'll never have the chance to ask more questions of Fields—and I won't get a chance at any more dough."

"You've been overpaid already, Smith, with the hundred-buck retainer, but are you sure you haven't got another angle?"

"What would that be?"

"Are you sure you're not going to pick up the option on those shares?"

"So you couldn't find the receipt." Cellini swung his legs down and sat on the edge of the bed. "Get this—if I did find any receipt and cashed it, you'd know in a half hour. In addition, no broker would honor such a transaction with a stranger. Also—"

"All right, all right. Money means nothing to you. You're just a great big champion of justice."

Cellini's face twisted in a grimace. "Let's hear what you found out?"

"Hardly worth mentioning." Haenigson stood up. "Guess I'll toddle along."

"What about Howard? What will we do about him?"

"We?" asked the detective-sergeant with affected surprise. "You've decided to take his cure and I think it's a wise decision. Let me know how you make out."

"You mean you're not going to spring me out of here?"

Ira Haenigson said pleasantly, "Of course not," and left.

Minutes after the key had again turned in the lock, Cellini Smith still stared at the door.

It was another half hour before the door to Cellini's room opened and two attendants wheeled in a tea-cart that bore an enticing array of food. Behind, followed Howard who waved the two men out.

It was an abject, apologetic Howard. "Mr. Smith, it's all been a terrible mistake."

"Get out of here," said Cellini with an effort to remain calm. "Get the hell out!"

"You can't blame me for not believing you were a private detective. After all, you came here under false pretenses."

"I didn't come here—I was carried."

"But you agreed to take the cure and I was under the impression you were an alcoholic. Not until Sergeant Haenigson told me of the mistake I made did I believe you."

Howard laughed uneasily. "It's rather late and I suppose you must be hungry, Mr. Smith. You had better eat before you leave."

"I'm not leaving."

"That's fine," said Howard without enthusiasm. "You'll be my guest. Incidentally Haenigson told me that Fields' wrist watch proved he had been murdered. Could you explain what he meant?"

"The mark of his watch band was on the left wrist which would indicate that he was right-handed."

"So?" prompted Howard.

"Fields' right wrist was slashed which means that he would have had to hold the knife in his left hand—and he wouldn't have done that because he wasn't a southpaw."

"I see."

"That was a stupid blunder on the part of the killer. Someone simply walked in and stunned Fields with a blow on the head—with one of those heavy, glass ashtrays perhaps—then dragged him to the bathroom, put his arm into the wash bowl, cut the artery and let the body slide to the floor."

"But who, Mr. Smith?"

Cellini didn't reply but said: "I want to see

your complete files on Ivy Collins and Fields."

Howard hesitated a moment, then left. He returned shortly, carrying two folders which he gave to Cellini.

THE one on Henry Fields supplied scanty information. He had been picked up at the Kitty Klub and admitted on Thursday the 26th. The medical record spoke of extreme irritability and a psychopathic condition and recommended that he be permitted no visitors or phone calls.

The one on Ivy Collins was hardly more illuminating. Medically, she was diagnosed as being emotionally immature. Cellini's eyebrows went up. She had seemed to him emotionally overripe. His chief interest, however, was in the visitor who had come to see her and had then gone to Fields, posing as Cellini Smith. This was Saturday and the imposter had come two days before. According to the record, Ivy Collins had had no visitors on that day.

Cellini tossed the cards aside and Howard asked again: "Who could have killed Fields?"

"Maybe you."

"You have no reason to think that!"

"No? In the first place, you're treating me with kid gloves. You're afraid I might discover something. In the second place, you're a liar. Haenigson would never have told you I'm a private detective because he likes the idea of me stewing here."

"You're being unfair, Mr. Smith."

"Nor would he have told you of the wrist watch. If he had, however, it would have been with good reason and he would have explained what he meant. You found it necessary to ask me because all you knew was what you overheard—eavesdropping on us."

Howard pointed to the door. "That's solid pine. It would be impossible to hear anything through that."

"Maybe so." Cellini pulled the bed aside and looked behind it. He examined the base and the picture moldings and ripped the drapes from the window. His search ended with the radiator grill set in the wall.

He reached inside and tore out a small microphone that had been placed behind the grill.

Nervously, Howard said: "The people I bought this place from wired the rooms with dictaphones. I've never bothered to take them out but I don't use them."

"My aching back!" commented Cellini Smith.

"There's no reason for us to be unfriendly," Howard continued. "I'd like to part with you on better terms and I do wish you'd eat some of that food because you must be hungry."

"Stop cueing me like a ham actor, Howard, because we haven't come to the parting of the ways yet. I'm sticking around to nail you for the killing. As for your food—"

Cellini picked up a bowl of soup and hurled

it against the wall. He picked up the salad dish and threw it at the barred window. "That's what I'll do. I'll nail you whether you're guilty or innocent!"

Hurriedly, Howard left. Methodically, with extreme precision, Cellini picked up each dish and threw it with all his strength. "Psychopathic inferior," he said and hurled the coffee. "Social lubricant. . . euthanasia. . . occupational therapy. . ." When the tea-cart was bare, he stood motionless, calming himself. Then he walked out, feeling a little better.

It was nearing eight P.M. when he again stepped into the corridor and headed for the pantry.

Tom Sprigley and Larry Coomb were there but they were not drinking.

Sprigley welcomed Cellini with a wink and said: "This milkhead was trying to find out where you were hiding. He says he wants to break your dirty neck."

"Is there a phone in that guest room of yours," asked Cellini.

Coomb mustered what dignity he could and said: "You stay away from her. This is a final warning."

"Have you got an Ameche in your room?" Cellini repeated.

"Do you hear me?" Coomb was again slapping his thighs nervously with his gloves. "Stay away from her."

"Damn it!" shouted Cellini. "Is there a phone in your room?"

"Yes, there is, but I'm warning you that I'll kill you if you don't stay away from Miss Collins. I intend to marry her."

Miss Banks entered. "Gentlemen, please." Slowly, she looked at each of the men. Her pale, unattractive face seemed to be under a strain. "Please be quiet. There is group singing going on in the social room. If you wish to join them—"

"I don't wish to join anybody," snapped Cellini. "I just want to find out who killed Henry Fields and get out of here!"

"Killed?" repeated the nurse.

"That's right. Perhaps a mercy killing. As for you, Coomb, your motive might have been jealousy."

"Take it easy," said Sprigley. "Maybe you are a detective but you had a chance to do it yourself, you know."

"How do you know I'm a detective?"

"Howard told me. Why?"

"Did you tell Ivy?"

"Yes, I told her this afternoon. I even told her not to mention to the police your asking about Fields last night. You seem mighty ungrateful—"

He stopped. From some place in front of the building they could hear hoarse shouts. There was something familiar about one of the voices and Cellini headed for the noise.



IT WAS a strange scene that met his eyes when he reached the entrance. The mammoth figure of Duck-Eye Ryan stood just inside the doorway. Three white-jacketed men were trying to get at him without meeting the huge fist that lashed out like a piston. Duck-Eye's left arm was wrapped around the neck of Mario, the bartender of the Kitty Klub.

As Duck-Eye sighted Cellini, he delivered a yelp of pleasure, dropped Mario to the floor and said, "Gee," three times.

Cellini dodged his friend's embrace and bent over Mario.

"When do you have your night off at the Klub?" he asked. "It's Thursday, isn't it?"

Mario stood up slowly and began to rub his neck.

Howard's patients began to crowd out of the social room and one of them announced triumphantly: "I always said whiskey was a stimulant and not a depressant."

Howard himself appeared and demanded the cause of the commotion. An attendant pointed to Duck-Eye and replied: "That guy barged in here dragging the other one. He's like a bull and there's no stopping him."

"All right," nodded Howard. "Will everybody please clear this place?"

Cellini turned to Mario again. "It is Thursday, isn't it?" He thought Mario nodded and said: "Does the Klub send out invitations to people to come around and visit the joint?"

Howard indicated Mario. "Bring him into my office."

A look of sheer terror crossed the bartender's face. He suddenly shouted, "You'll never get me," and dashed out through the door.

Howard snapped, "Go after him," and walked away.

"That's fine," said Cellini Smith. "You're glad to see me. Now tell me how you got here."

Duck-Eye Ryan rubbed his round, unblinking eyes which were misty with pleasure and replied: "When I woke up at that joint you wasn't there and they said you was home. You wasn't."

"Then what?"

"I went back tonight and asked again from that bar jockey and he told me."

"Well, why did you drag him here?"

Duck-Eye rubbed his knuckles. "He wouldn't tell at first so I shoved him around. When he gave in I didn't know if he was leveling so I brought him along."

Cellini scratched at his chin. That still didn't explain Mario's terror of Howard.

Duck-Eye said: "Gee it's good to see you. What about a drink?"

Cellini began to lead the way toward the

pantry when Tom Sprigley appeared at the doorway. He had a finger to his lips and he beckoned them to follow him outside into the grounds.

They went after him. It was a cool night, with a slight drizzle and their feet made no sound on the sodden ground. They followed as Sprigley walked around the large building, hugging the walls to minimize the danger of being seen by those inside.

As they reached a wing in the far end of the building, Sprigley waved them down. Carefully, they closed in and stopped in front of a lighted window. The drapes were partly open and they could see inside.

As they looked, they saw three men. Mario sat on the floor wedged in the right angle of one of the room's corners. As they watched, Freddy kicked him in the stomach. Mario did not cry out because a gag bound his mouth and he did not hit back because his arms were stretched across his chest, inside a straitjacket. On a bed, smoking a cigarette, sat Howard taking in the scene.

Freddy's foot moved again, this time catching the victim in the ribs. Through the partly-open window, Cellini could hear the thud of the kick. Freddy paused, as if waiting for some sign from Mario, then moved in again. He seemed quite bored as his fists and feet lashed out at ten-second intervals.

Within the space of a minute, the helpless bartender's face became a red jelly, his body a mass of flesh throbbing with pain. The blows fell, the blood ran. Mario's head seemed to nod.

Sprigley shivered. "God, I can't watch that any more!" he cried. "I'm getting out of here. I need a drink." Rapidly, he walked away.

Inside the room, Freddy and Howard froze as they heard the voice. Then one of them leaped for the wall switch and darkness flooded the room.

Cellini and Duck-Eye began to make their way back, but it was too late. Attendants were beginning to scour the grounds for them.

CELLINI Smith and Duck-Eye Ryan turned and raced the other way. There was a yell as they were sighted. A man suddenly appeared in front of them but Duck-Eye charged ahead as if he were a bulldozer and the man a weed. They were around in the rear of the building now. They sighted another door and made for it.

It was open and they were inside again, inside where they were relatively safe, for Howard could not be sure who had watched him working on the bartender.

They paused as Cellini attempted to orient himself, trying to remember where the room had been. They heard a moan, which gradually became louder and more strident, and they made toward the sound. It was probably Mario

who had succeeded in working himself free of the gag.

The sound had not come from Mario, however, but from Miss Banks who stood blocking the entrance. Roughly, Cellini pushed past her. This was the room. Mario still lay in the corner, the gag was still on his mouth—but there was a difference. Now, a knife was imbedded within his body.

It was an ordinary kitchen knife, no doubt sharp-pointed for it had made a clean cut through the tough cloth of the straitjacket. The blood-encrusted face seemed twisted in a mixture of fright and pain. He had probably seen his murderer come through the doorway and had watched as the knife was carefully plunged into him. He had seen it without being able to shout or to make any move to defend himself.

Cellini turned and faced Miss Banks. "Well, what about it? Is this another mercy killing?"

She had stopped moaning and he thought she might faint. Instead, she stared at the body for another moment, then turned and fled.

Duck-Eye asked: "Should I bring that goon back?"

"Let her go. I'll catch up with her later."

He saw a phone on a table and dialed Ira Haenigson's home number. This was evidently another guest room, since the patients were not allowed such a convenience. No doubt Coomb was staying nearby—perhaps in this very room.

There was a growl on the other end of the receiver and Cellini said: "Get your fat rump over here."

"What are you up to now, Smith?" demanded the detective-sergeant suspiciously.

"I've got a nice hunk of sirloin for you to look over. With a knife in it."

"Knife?"

"Sure. Think of the fun you'll have spreading powder over it and then finding out that the nasty killer heard about fingerprints and was wearing gloves to—"

There was an oath and the sound of the receiver being smashed down by Haenigson.

Duck-Eye said: "We got company, Cellini."

He turned to find Howard staring at the body. "That took a lot of courage, didn't it?" he asked.

"Courage?" repeated Howard stupidly. He started for the phone.

"Don't bother. I've already called Haenigson."

"You have? That was very clever of you."

"Not especially, Howard. Learning to dial a telephone is just a matter of coordination. Anybody can learn."

"It was clever because it diverts suspicion from you. Smith," he announced, "you may consider yourself under arrest."

"I'll be glad to consider it," said Cellini amiably. "In the meantime I want a drink and I'm

sick of that fuel oil you have in the pantry. Where's your private stock?"

"I told you I have none. This is a horrible murder—"

"Save it for your memory book," said Cellini and left.

Sprigley's hand shook as he poured drinks for Cellini and Duck-Eye. He said: "We've got to do something about that poor man Howard and his thug were beating."

"We don't have to do anything," Cellini snapped as he began pulling open drawers and cupboards.

Sprigley eyed him curiously. "That's rather callous—or cowardly."

"Maybe both." Cellini found some cutlery. "Don't they keep any larger knives around here?"

"How should I know? Frankly, I'm disappointed in you, Smith."

"Where's the kitchen?"

"Not far. The three of us should have gone in and stopped that beating."

"If I remember right, Sprigley, you're the one who ran first. Every attendant in the place is outside right now, curry-combing the grounds because they heard you. Howard would probably give your right arm to find out who watched him going over the guy."

"I suppose so," Sprigley admitted glumly. He drained his glass and shivered. "I have no stomach for that sort of thing."

"Is it easy to get into the kitchen?" Cellini asked.

"Sure. I've raided it plenty of times. Why do you ask?"

"Because then it would be easy to get hold of a knife."

"Smith, if you're thinking of a knife to save that poor man from being beaten, you're crazy. Howard's a dangerous man and he's got a lot of helpers."

"Stop drooling. The guy will never be beaten again because he's dead."

"Dead?"

"Murdered. A knife was stuck into him ten minutes ago."

"Smith, you're lying. I don't know what your game is but I'm going to find out." He hurried out, white-faced and distraught.

Duck-Eye said sadly: "You shouldn't ought to let him to talk like that. Cellini, this stuff ain't even fit for me to drink."

"Then don't drink it."

"But that would be a waste," said Duck-Eye, downing a glassful of the watered liquor.

Cellini remembered that Haenigson and his crew would be arriving soon. If any sense were to be made out of the whole thing it would have to be done now. He polished off a half tumbler of the watered whiskey and left as Duck-Eye began to beg him to return to the Kitty Klub for some decent liquor.

CHAPTER FIVE

Alcoholic Solution



IVY COLLINS yelled, "Scram," to Cellini's knock. He entered. Ivy smiled at him from the depths of an easy chair and patted her lap in invitation. Her fiancé, who was sitting stiffly on an up-ended suitcase, made no move but his thin nostrils flared in apparent anger. He wore his hat, as if ready to leave.

Cellini sat down on the bed and asked: "May I come in?"

"Always," she cooed.

"Thank you. Just go on with your discussion."

"It's finished."

"It is not," snapped Larry Coomb. "And you, Smith, get out of here. Incidentally, I'm going to sue you for assault."

Cellini was beginning to feel the effects of the whiskey. "You must be tolerant and forgiving, Larry—or I'll really assault you."

"He wants me to go home with him," Ivy explained. "Right now."

"And you will!" Coomb's hands trembled. "I've done everything I could for you, Ivy. I've brought you here to be cured of drinking that rotgut, I've given you everything you want, I—"

His fiancée observed: "Nuts."

Cellini suddenly realized that Coomb was in love with her—deeply, desperately and hopelessly so. He began to feel sorry for him. "Why don't you trade her in for a zither, Larry? She's no good."

"There!" exclaimed Ivy. "That's what I've been telling him. He doesn't understand me. The real no-good me."

Coomb stood up. "This is all very crude and unpleasant. Ivy, get packed. I'm in a hurry."

"You have plenty of time," said Cellini, "because nobody's leaving this nuthouse. There's been another murder."

Cellini could read nothing in the silence which greeted his announcement and he continued: "The first one, which you no doubt know about, was Henry Fields. The second was Mario, the former bartender at the Kitty Klub."

Coomb said: "And if you don't leave Ivy alone, the third one will be you."

"That's what I'm wondering about because I know you have a temper that might easily lead you to murder. You had good reason to kill Fields and you had ample opportunity."

"Ivy, get packed!"

"I told you no one can leave till the cops get here. I can't figure why, but you're as crazy about Ivy as she is about whiskey. Maybe it's

the old sex appeal we read about. You knew that Fields made a play for her and you came here last night and stayed in a guest room without letting Ivy know."

"That was because I arrived late."

"Or because you wanted to catch the two of them. You might have visited Fields, had a fight—and you won. But what worries me is what your connection with Mario could have been."

"Larry knew him," Ivy Collins supplied, "because he used to come to the Kitty Klub to drag me out."

"Which means that you knew him, too," Cellini said. "You were blackmailing Fields, weren't you?"

"A girl has to live."

"But maybe Fields didn't. Last night when I asked about Fields you showed your fangs because you thought I might be a detective."

"Last night," she said moodily, "I was afraid you'd queer the pitch. But I don't give a hoot now. I'm going back to the runway."

"What changed your mind?"

"You did, when you made him eat the gloves. You and your damned gloves!" she shouted at Larry Coomb. "Are you an Eskimo? You don't need them around here. What do you always carry them for?"

"Ivy, please." Coomb sounded distressed. "Forget little things like that. We want each other."

"I want you like a hole in the head! We're through. Do you understand? You're not a man. I wouldn't take you with a keg of caviar!"

"Let's get back to you, Ivy," Cellini said, "because I *am* a detective."

"Oh I knew that. I can spot one in the last row of the balcony right in the middle of a show." She winked. "But I still like you."

"If you had me spotted then, why did you try to warn me off Fields last night?"

"What do you think?"

"Because," replied Cellini, "you had Fields figured as an easy touch. You probably have some notes from him asking you to drop around to his room at night and you were ready to cash in."

"You're so understanding."

The door suddenly burst open and Miss Banks appeared. Her hair was disheveled and her uniform had lost its immaculate appearance. She stood swaying gently from side to side and grinned. "Hullo."

She was drunk, completely so, down to her very feet which seemed to beat on the floor in a slow dance.

IVY COLLINS regarded Miss Banks with astonishment and said: "Well, well. If it isn't Miss Prissy-Puss. How the mighty have fallen."

"You're beautiful," said Miss Banks with

feeling. "I only wish I could be more like you."

She walked over to a table with a casual innocence that was very obvious. Suddenly she grabbed a handbag from the table, whirled and dashed out.

"Hey!" yelled Ivy. "That's my purse. I got dough in it."

Cellini said, "What the hell!" and ran into the corridor. Miss Banks was nowhere in sight. An elderly man walked by and he asked him: "Did you see Miss Banks?"

"Yes, and she stank from liquor—like you, sir. What you must remember is that alcohol is primarily a carbohydrate so—"

"Which way did she go?"

"I'm talking to you, young man. So you must prevent the excess carbohydrate from going to the brain by taking an injection of vitamin B-complex."

Cellini gave up and raced down the hallway. He saw a half-open door leading down to the basement and he descended the steps two at a time. He found himself in the middle of trunks and boxes and a gas furnace. He saw a distant light and made for it.

It was a welcome sight. Here was a room where Howard kept his private stock—sealed bottles that had not yet been watered down for medicinal use in the pantry.

The walls were lined with wine bottles and cases of liquor and beer stood on the floor. Miss Banks sat on one of the cases by an open bottle of Scotch. She had Ivy's purse open and she was covering her face with lipstick, rouge, powder and mascara. In her drunkenness, she was producing the effect of an Indian smeared with warpaint.

She waved to Cellini happily and continued the smearing. He pulled out a bottle of Scotch and pried it open with a knife. He drank long and deeply and put the bottle to his lips again. He sat on a case, watching her and when a third of the bottle was empty he went over to her and said: "You're lousing it all up."

He wiped her face clean with a handkerchief and began applying cosmetics. The result was no happier for he wasn't any more sober than she.

They drank and he said: "A fine thing. A nurse getting drunk."

"I'm not really a nurse. After I was cured I just stayed on to help as a sort of orderly. Kiss me."

"I thought you weren't interested in men."

"I wasn't. Howard cured me of a lot of things. Even of life until I learned better to-night."

"What changed your mind?"

She trembled in recollection. "Did you see Fields dead in the bathroom? Did you see the knife in the poor man who was tied up? I couldn't bear it." She shuddered and threw one arm around his neck as the other reached

for the bottle. She drank, then sighed happily.

Cellini tried to pull away but her arm tightened. He asked: "Did you ever before see the man who was knifed?"

"Often. He used to come to visit Howard. I'm going to live again. Why don't you help me?"

Cellini considered it and decided not to help her live again. He pulled away and sat down on a case with his bottle. He sat there for five minutes. It had needed some good liquor to do it but now he was suddenly thinking with a beautiful clarity. He was beginning to see sense in everything.

He rose, gathered up an armful of bottles and lurched out.

As Cellini Smith again reached the first-floor corridor he found himself facing Howard and Freddy.

"I knew I'd find you here, Smith," Howard snapped. "I'm locking you up till the police get here. You're under arrest."

Freddy said: "Put up your hands, Smith." There was a .38 automatic in his hands to lend persuasion to his words.

Cellini raised his hands and the bottles of Scotch crashed to the floor. The attendant began to step forward when Duck-Eye Ryan, attracted by the breaking glass, appeared in back of them.

It was the sort of situation that Duck-Eye understood, one of the few things to which he could react quickly. He bounded forward, his huge paw closed over the gun and twisted it from Freddy's hands. Howard fled.

Duck-Eye beamed with self-pride. "Should I do something else, Cellini? I mean to this guy?"

"No." Cellini remembered Freddy working over the helpless Mario. "No. I want to do it myself." He leaned against the wall, sorry that he had had so much to drink. "O.K., Freddy. Let's see how good you are with someone who's not in a straitjacket."

Cellini moved in to be jarred back by a blow on his chest. Freddy sensed his advantage and struck rapidly. Cellini could feel the blows but they did not hurt. They seemed almost pleasant, like the stinging effect of an after-shave lotion. He knew there was a cut over one eye and he could taste blood on his lips. He hit at the face in front of him but he met only air. Why had he drunk so much?

Duck-Eye circled in unbelieving horror as Freddy moved in for the kill. Cellini decided to stop hitting at the face. It was too small. There was no percentage in it. He kept taking blows as he tried to remember how he could hurt Freddy most. Then it came to him. By now, the attendant was not concerned with defending himself and he stepped back for the finishing blow. Suddenly, Cellini ducked and lunged at his opponent's groin.

There was an agonized scream from Freddy and he dropped. The blood tasted salty on Cellini's lips. His mind's eye saw Freddy hammering at the bound Mario. This was not enough punishment. He took careful aim and kicked Freddy's jawbone. He heard a satisfying crack.

"Gee," said Duck-Eye, "you look like a mess."

Cellini felt happy and exhilarated. His face was still pleasantly numb and did not hurt. With the one eye that was not closed he gazed ruefully at the broken bottles. He needed more.

He pushed through the group of chattering and excited patients, who had gathered toward the end of the fight, and made his way down to the cellar again. Miss Banks was now lying on the floor where she had passed out. He gathered up another armful of bottles, stumbled out.



HE sound of approaching sirens came to Cellini Smith as he kicked at Ivy Collins' door.

She gasped with delight as he entered, and helped relieve him of the bottles. "This is wonderful. All for me?"

"For us," he corrected. "I'm not getting anything out of this job so at least Howard can pay me off this way."

She fetched two glasses and they sat down on the carpet. "Your kisser sure looks like beef hash. That's one thing you got out of it."

He opened a bottle. "Freddy also got something—a cast on his jaw for a few weeks."

"Here's to the next one to die," she said and they clicked glasses in a toast.

"There won't be any next one. What happened to the boy-friend?"

"Larry? I guess I convinced him there was no business and he went away." She giggled and held out her glass. "Some more please. Anyway, you're cuter than him."

"It's just as well. I know your boy-friend didn't do it."

"Why not?" she asked in a disappointed tone.

"Motive. He had plenty reason to kill Fields on account of you but there was no reason for Mario. Besides, Coomb stayed in a guest room last night and he had a phone there. He didn't have to go to the office."

"A phone yet," she said. "You're drunk."

"Sure. So are you. The motive behind Mario's killing is missing for you, too. And as for Fields, he wasn't worth anything to you dead, either."

"I'd kill for you, Cellini. I'm currrrazy about you."

Cellini shook his head and refilled the glasses. "It all gets back to the stock that Fields optioned. And we mustn't forget the business about Thursdays."

"Yes," agreed Ivy. "We must always remember Thursdays."

"You see, I don't like coincidences and three Thursdays in a row is too much. Henry Fields was admitted here from the Kitty Klub on a Thursday. Mario's night off as bartender was a Thursday. The guy who visited Fields, claiming he was Cellini Smith, came on a Thursday."

"Pour some more and tell me what all that proves."

"It proves that the imposter who impersonated me was Mario. Fields didn't know Mario because he came here from the Klub on a night when Mario was off. And later, Mario was able to leave the Klub and pose as me because that was his night off, too."

"I don't care even if I don't understand you," she said. "You're cute but you got blood in your hair."

"Fields thought Mario got in as a visitor from you but you had no visitor that Thursday. It had to be someone who could come and go from this prison as he wished and Mario had that privilege because he was a regular visitor. He used to come here to get payed off."

"I like money." She poured some Scotch onto his head and began shampooing his hair.

"Mario not only got wages as a bartender but he also got a percentage for steering people to this joint. He worked hand in glove with Howard. I think I'll get Howard and ask him."

"No you don't," said Ivy firmly. "I'm trying to clean your hair out and you're staying."

"Say, maybe I can get Howard here without leaving." Not trusting himself to stand, he crawled on hands and knees to the radiator grill and felt behind it. It was there.

"One, two, three, four," said Cellini. "One, two, three—"

Ivy asked: "Have you gone nuts?"

"I'm just testing the dictaphone. All right, Howard. I know you're listening in on all this so you better get over here. And come with Sprigley and Haenigson. I know Haenigson's there because I heard the sirens twenty minutes ago. If he won't come, Haenigson, then bring him. That corpse he just showed you had a straitjacket on it a little while ago. I'll tell you more when you get here."

Cellini crawled back to where Ivy sat and they drank until Haenigson, Sprigley, Howard and a plainsclothesman crowded into the room.

"What's this business of a straitjacket?" demanded the detective-sergeant. "And get off the floor and stop making a fool of yourself."

"Don't shove, Haenigson. I'm giving you the story, you stinker, not because I like you but because I want Howard nailed."

"Nailed for what?" demanded Haenigson.

"Mario, for one thing." He turned to Howard. "You and Freddy were beating him up while he was in a straitjacket. You've no doubt taken him out of it since then. At any rate, there were witnesses to the beating. Weren't there, Sprigley?"

"I'll sure testify to that," stated Sprigley.

"In addition," Cellini said, "this place is a racket even if you do make a limited attempt to cure people of alcoholism. You keep liquor in the pantry, ostensibly for your patients to taper off on the drink but actually to keep them around here longer so they'll pay more. You had Mario for a shill—and I don't know how many more—to steer suckers here who were so drunk they didn't know what they were signing."

"Howard will be taken care of," said Haenigson. "Let's get back to the beating."

"Mario pulled a fast one. As Howard's little helper, he gave him the dope on customers he sent here, so he phoned up Howard last night and told him that I had the crazy idea I was a detective and to humor me. Howard later found out it was true and when Duck-Eye dragged Mario here Howard went to work on him to find out what it was all about because he was afraid of losing this lush racket. Before Mario could squeal he was murdered."

"Good," nodded Haenigson. "Let's get to the murders."

"I told you Fields' story about optioning stock from a call broker. What happened was one of two things. Either the call broker decided to bet against Fields and didn't cover himself by optioning the stock, or he did. The broker then heard of the four-way split in shares and if he hadn't optioned the stock he stood to lose a lot of money when Fields came for the payoff. If he had optioned the stock the broker had a chance to hold on to it and make a lot of money if only Fields could be kept out of the way till the option date had passed. Isn't that right, Sprigley?"

"Why ask me?"

"Because you must work for that broker. Because you're the killer."

THE plainclothesman moved next to Sprigley who said: "You're disgustingly drunk and you're not making sense."

"You're right on only the first count," said

Cellini. "You knew of Mario's connection with this place and you had the Kitty Klub send an invitation to Fields. Lots of places do that. Then when Fields went to the Klub, Mario had the relief bartender slip him a mickey. Fields woke up here and found he couldn't get out because Mario had told Howard that Fields had to be watched."

"In the meantime, you came here yourself to keep an eye on Fields and to make friends with him. That was your first mistake, Sprigley, when you told me you had been here before. Miss Banks told me otherwise."

Cellini continued: "Of course when you made friends with Fields he couldn't tell you the whole story—or anybody else—because there would have been a run on the stock that would have been traced back to Fields who was a member of the firm. However, he did tell you he was trying to smuggle out a letter to Cellini Smith and probably asked you to mail it. So you got Mario to pose as me in order to make Fields think a dick was working for him."

"No one can pose as you, sugar," said Ivy. "Anyway, I once mailed out a letter for Fields."

"Fine. That's the one that got me here. When you heard my name you telephoned Mario to warn Howard about my supposed hallucination. That was that first phone call in your office last night, Howard."

"Later, while I was in the office, Sprigley had time to kill Fields. Still later when we watched Mario's beating he knew the guy was ready to squeal so he talked out loud to stop it until he had a chance to knife him. It was neat—calling us out to watch the beating and then knifing Mario while we were being chased."

"You're not very bright, Sprigley. You said Howard told you this afternoon that I was a detective. Howard himself didn't know that till early this evening when he listened in on the dictaphone—and he wouldn't have told you."

Haenigson stood up. "Let's go. Coming Smith?"

"Not for about a week," replied Cellini. "I'm going to take Howard's Cure in reverse."

"You and me both," cooed Ivy Collins.

Tired Kidneys Often Bring Sleepless Nights

Doctors say your kidneys contain 15 miles of tiny tubes or filters which help to purify the blood and keep you healthy. When they get tired and don't work right in the daytime, many people have to get up nights. Frequent or scanty passages with smarting and burning sometimes shows there is something wrong with your kidneys or bladder. Don't neglect this condition and lose valuable, restful sleep.

When disorder of kidney function permits

poisonous matter to remain in your blood, it may also cause nagging backache, rheumatic pains, leg pains, loss of pep and energy, swelling, puffiness under the eyes, headaches and dizziness.

Don't wait! Ask your druggist for Doan's Pills, used successfully by millions for over 40 years. They give happy relief and will help the 15 miles of kidney tubes flush out poisonous waste from your blood. Get Doan's Pills.

OVER

By
JULIUS LONG

CHAPTER ONE

Ditson's Dive



IT WASN'T nice to look at, and come to think of it, I don't really know why I had to look at it. I guess it was just one of those things a cop is supposed to do. I'd been sent all the way from the attorney general's office at Capital City, to

Midtown to investigate the Ed Ditson case, and taking a look at his corpse seemed a routine thing to do.

Not that looking at it told me anything I hadn't learned from reading the papers. They'd said that Ditson's body had fallen from the twelfth floor of the Maramoor Hotel, and that meant a messy corpse. The papers had also described how the body had fallen into a parked convertible. A girl, Sheila Brown, had been sitting in the convertible, and that meant that her body wouldn't be nice to look at, either.

"Was she smashed up as bad as this?" I asked, indicating what was left of Ditson. Doc Barrett, the county coroner, shook his head.

"No, not nearly so much. Ditson struck her a glancing blow. It was his falling across the



MY DEAD BOOTY

Suicide or murder? Was it an accident when Ed Ditson fell twelve stories into a car, killing Sheila Brown? Ben Corbett applied his talents to the Midtown mess—leaving not a stone unturned—and caused a couple of big-time grafters to come crawling out from under their rocks.

car door that practically cut him in two like that. Sheila's family insisted on having the body right away, and I saw no reason to object. A whole undertaking establishment has been working on her trying to fix her up for the funeral."

"You knew her, did you?"

"Oh, yes. Sheila was a lovely girl. One of the most striking brunettes I've ever seen. Fine family. Lots of money. It's just a damn shame that this thing had to happen. Ditson I have no sympathy for. If he wanted to take his own life, O.K. Why did he have to take Sheila's too?"

I said I didn't know why things like that had to happen and gestured to Barrett that he should shove Ditson back into the cooler. He did, and we went on out of the morgue to my car. Maybe you wonder why a suicide rated an investigation from the office of the attorney general. The answer to that one was available in the headlines of not only the local papers but all those in the state. Ditson's dive from his hotel window had busted wide open the whole gambling racket in the state.

"As near as I can gather from the stuff in the papers," I told Barrett as I drove away, "Ditson came over from beyond the state line with thirty thousand dollars in his kick that he'd made out of selling his real estate hold-

ings. So his first stop after he gets here is the Silver Dollar. Four hours later the thirty grand was gone. Right?"

"I don't think those facts are in dispute, Mr. Corbett. Everybody knows about the Silver Dollar, and it's known that Ditson did have that much money on him when he arrived in town. He certainly didn't have any on him when he made his dive. And there wasn't any money left behind in his hotel room."

"What kind of cretin-brains are running the gambling in this town?" I asked. "If they'd used a couple ounces of sense, Ditson would never have committed suicide, and the fat wouldn't be in the fire. Ditson's death has made so much stink that not only is gambling batted down tight in Midtown, but there's nothing open in the entire state."

Barrett nodded. "But it'll blow over. When the heat's off, maybe three or four months from now, everything, including the Silver Dollar, will be open again."

"Sure, but in the meantime the racket won't take in a five-dollar bill. I'd think the lame brains running the set-up in this town would have been able to figure out with pencil and paper that it would be cheaper to give Ditson back his thirty grand and quiet his beef. Especially when he'd advertised in the news-

A Ben Corbett Novelette



Bronson tried to warn Sheila but she just laughed as if she thought he was crazy.

papers that he was going to do the Dutch."

"Yes, Mr. Corbett, I agree with you. But I'm certainly not worrying about the racket people in this town. I for one am glad this thing has brought the situation out into the open. I hope you do something about it. The local authorities won't. That's why the Reform Committee went to the attorney general's office."

I STOPPED for a red light and gave Barrett a look out of the corner of my eye. He was nearly forty—he looked intelligent, and he should have known better.

"Look here, Doc, you said yourself that after the heat was off, all the joints would open up again. Or words to that effect."

"But I meant that's what would happen under normal conditions, Mr. Corbett. But conditions aren't normal. The tragic death of Sheila Brown, a lovely girl from one of our best families, has aroused public indignation against the rackets. I have great hopes for you, Mr. Corbett. I'm sure you'll get the goods on Spain Westfall, the man at the head of all the rackets. He's the one really responsible for Sheila Brown's death."

I shifted gears and got through the intersection.

"Suppose I do get the goods on Westfall? So he gets a couple of years in the pen. Then one of two things happens. Either he keeps his fingers on the controls or somebody else moves in and takes over. Three months after he's said hello to the warden, the town's going full blast again."

"You are very cynical, Mr. Corbett."

"The hell I am. I'm just practical. People will always gamble. They'll gamble probably a little bit more so long as it's a crime. And it probably always will be a crime in our state because two powerful classes of people will keep the anti-gambling laws on the books. I mean the church people and the racket people, both in and out of uniform."

Barrett looked horrified. "But certainly you can't mean that you favor legalizing gambling any more than you favor abolishing the laws against the use of narcotics!"

"Oh, but I do! There's a difference between gambling and using drugs. People have no instinct to use drugs. But they do have a mania for any form of gambling, and the only sensible solution is to let them gamble legally. Then their gambling can be controlled, and it won't be in the hands of a slimy bunch of crooks. And law enforcement officers won't be working for the same slimy bunch. Now don't pretend that any gambling joint can stay open five minutes if it isn't paying off to the local law!"

"I'm not pretending any such thing," Barrett said earnestly. "But I do think that the pressure of righteous public indignation can prevail over dishonest policemen."

"Sure it can, but not for very long stretches.

The racket boys know that—they merely crawl back under their rocks till it's safe to come out. The point is they always come out."

Barrett sighed deeply, and I let it go at that. I dropped him off at his office, then cut across to police headquarters. I'd already introduced myself there and had gotten a colder reception than a petticoat salesman at a nudist colony. It seemed the Chief was in northern Michigan for his health, and the place had been left in charge of a captain named Hinchman.

Hinchman looked up sourly when I appeared in his office.

"Well, the boy wonder is back again! I suppose you've found out by this time that Ditson wasn't any suicide at all but that he was pushed out of that window at the Maramoor!"

Hinchman stood about six-feet-four, and he had the weight to go with the height. He looked rugged and tough, and something in his eyes indicated that he could teach a Jap when it came to low blows. But I promised myself that before I left the corporate limits of Midtown, I'd hit Hinchman at least once.

For the time being, I said: "As a matter of fact, I've been wondering just who did see Ditson take his dive. Would you mind my taking a look at the file?"

"Help yourself," sneered Hinchman. "Some of the boys will tell you where it is, if you can't find it."

When a clerk had reluctantly handed over the file, I found about enough stuff to convince anybody who had already seen Ditson's body that he was dead. There just wasn't anything there. It did mention the name of Carl Bronson as the only person who had witnessed Ditson's leap. I remembered the name. Carl Bronson was the owner of the convertible into which the body had fallen. The girl, Sheila Brown, had been his fiancée.

It didn't take much imagination to see how tough a deal like that would be on Bronson. He'd temporarily parked his car in the hotel's no-parking zone and run across the street to where his investment brokerage office was located. His statement in the file said he'd turned back to wave to Sheila when he'd reached the opposite curb. She waved back, then he happened to look up.

Ditson was standing in the window. At that moment he leaped. Bronson said he simply couldn't utter a sound. He stood there and watched the falling body. He said he knew it was going to fall into the convertible, and he tried to warn Sheila with gestures. But she just laughed at him as if she thought he was crazy. Still stricken speechless, he watched Ditson's body crush her.

This had taken place the evening before at about 9:10 P.M., when dusk was beginning to fall. Apparently nobody else had seen Ditson leap, or at least, if anybody had, the police

hadn't bothered to find him. All mention of the cause for Ditson's suicide, even of his letters, published in the newspapers the evening before, was omitted from the file. This was natural enough, perhaps, for Ditson had accused the cops of giving him the bum's rush when he'd complained about his losses at the Silver Dollar.

I handed back the file to the waiting clerk and walked out of the building. A cop was busy writing up a ticket for my car. I'd parked it in a space marked: *Reserved for Police Cars Only*. I didn't tell the cop who I was, because I didn't think it would mean anything if I did. I pocketed the ticket and drove off. It was only four-thirty in the afternoon, and I thought maybe I could catch Spain Westfall.



HE delegation of Reform Committee members had said Westfall occupied a suite in the biggest office building in Midtown. That would be the Clayton Building, for you could see it almost any place in town. It was fifty stories high—why it was that high, I didn't know. Westfall's name was listed as Westfall, Inc., so I took an elevator to the thirtieth floor, where the suite was located.

The receptionist sat in the foyer, and I gathered that Westfall had the whole floor. I gave her my name, and right away she ushered me into Westfall's private room.

"You've kept me waiting," said Westfall. "I supposed I'd be your first stop in Midtown."

He was a medium-sized man of about fifty-five. His hair was graying. His face was intelligent, and his eyes showed a sly sense of humor. He held out his hand, and I shook it.

"Sit down, Corbett—I've heard about you. Believe it or not, I'm really glad to see you in Midtown. There's something wrong about this whole Ditson deal, and maybe you're just the man to put his finger on it."

"I thought maybe you were the man. You don't deny owning the Silver Dollar, do you?"

Westfall laughed. "Of course not! I'm the man higher-up that the Reform Committee is always trying to get something on. Yet I've never denied ownership of any property they said I owned. Why should I?"

I thought about the set-up with the local cops and said I didn't see any real reason why he should. None of Westfall's gambling places had been running for a day, and apparently he had resigned himself to keeping them that way for several months. I thought the Reform Committee was a little late in filing its complaints with Kever's office—I'd been sent to Midtown to lock the stable door after the horse had been stolen.

"This thing has really got me upset," West-

fall conceded. "I don't like the kind of publicity it makes. I don't force people to come into the Silver Dollar or any place like it. And I don't like to see people who can't afford to lose. This Ditson was strictly a fool. What's worse, he's a welsher. It isn't him I care about—that Brown girl was a swell little kid. She used to come into the Silver Dollar and drop a little dough—quite a little dough, in fact. But she had more of it than she knew what to do with. Yes, Corbett, she was all right in every way."

"It was all so unnecessary. I can't understand why a smart operator like you wouldn't have taken care of Ditson before he dived. It doesn't make sense."

Westfall's face hardened.

"I sent two of my boys with thirty grand to the Maramoor not forty-five minutes before Ditson jumped. I haven't seen either of them since."

"You're not kidding?" He just looked at me, and I didn't repeat the question. "All right, I believe you. So the guys went south with your dough. So you should give me their names and description so I can find them."

Westfall laughed. "Oh, I'll find them, all right." He laughed again, but I didn't. His two mugs wouldn't have laughed either, if they had seen the look in Westfall's eyes.

"OF COURSE Westfall's lying," Kever said over the long-distance phone. "I'm amazed at you, Ben. You should know better than to believe a crook like Westfall. He never sent any thirty thousand over to the Maramoor or even five. He's taking you for a ride."

I didn't argue. Kever always knew all the answers. He had all of his knowledge of human nature summed up in a few rules of thumb. It was so much easier than admitting that no two human beings are completely alike, and that none of them is completely predictable.

Westfall was a racketeer in Kever's eyes, and that meant nothing he said could be believed. There was no use arguing, so I didn't.

"Well, what do you want me to do? You sent me up here to bust up the gambling in Midtown, and now that I'm here, it's already busted up. You want me to come back to Capital City?"

Kever's inner explosion sounded over the phone.

"What am I paying you for? Don't you know Westfall and all those other rats will open up again unless you nail somebody to the cross? I want some indictments! Get the chief of police! Get the sheriff! Get the district attorney! They've all had their hands out, and I want them all indicted!"

"Do you mind if I have dinner first, or do you want all that done before eight o'clock?"

Kever hung up. I hung up. I thought it would be a good idea to drink dinner instead of eat-

ing it. I'd just considered a half-dozen pros and a few cons when there was a rap on my door. My door bore the number 1231. You guessed it. I'd checked in at the Maramoor a couple of doors down from Ditson's room, 1229. I had a nice view of the asphalt, and I couldn't look at it without thinking of Ditson. Other people seemed to have remembered, too. There weren't any parked cars in the reserved space down there.

"Are you sure," I asked the girl in my doorway, "that you haven't made some mistake? You can't want to see me because you don't know me. I don't even know who gave you my name."

"But I do know you, Mr. Corbett, at least by reputation. You see, I'm Mary Ditson."

"Oh." I remembered reading that Ditson had had a daughter. Her picture hadn't been in the papers, so I made her open up her handbag and shell out sufficient identification.

"I'd have gotten around to you sooner or later," I told her, stepping aside to let her in. "You're stopping here at the Maramoor?"

She gave me lifted eyebrows. "But how could I? I can't pay five dollars a day for a room. No, I'm staying in a little hotel on the edge of the business section, the Broadhurst."

"Short on cash, huh?"

"Very much so. I have a little money saved up, but it won't last if I have to stay here much longer. They won't release my father's body."

"Oh." I thought about how quick Hinchman had been to let go of Sheila Brown. It couldn't serve any purpose to keep Ditson in the cooler. Doc Barrett had found out everything he possibly could, even if they sealed the body in a time capsule. But red tape only gets tangled around people without the influence to cut it.

"That's why I wanted to see you, Mr. Corbett. You're not connected with these local authorities, and I thought maybe you could do something about the body."

"Is that all?"

"Well, I wanted to tell you how much I wanted you to get the man who robbed my father. I suppose you know who it was—Spain Westfall."

"Sure. I just talked to him. He admitted your father dropped the thirty thousand at the Silver Dollar, that is, he did by implication. He says, too, that he'd sent a couple of men with that much money to pay him off."

Mary Ditson's eyes widened. "But that's a lie! Dad never got the money! If he had, he wouldn't have jumped."

"Sounds logical. Westfall thinks his boys took a powder with the thirty grand. After all, that's booty in any man's language."

"I don't believe he did! He wouldn't give that much money back!"

"Well, I don't know. But I do know how you can collect the thirty thousand."

This time her eyes got even wider.

"How?"

"The easiest way would be to ask for it. Westfall realizes the heat's on. He can't stand having his victim's daughter in Midtown crying her eyes out and telling her troubles to the papers. He can't possibly shush this thing up until he's squared your beef. And he knows you can collect legally, for you're the only next of kin."

This time she eyed me a little suspiciously.

"You know that to be true? Are you a lawyer?"

"I'm not a lawyer, but I've had to associate with lawyers so long that I've picked up a little law. You've got a legal claim, but before you give half of it away in attorney fees, you'd better try on your own hook. Suppose you call up Westfall and make an appointment. He'll do you no harm. He wouldn't dare disturb a hair on your lovely head."



HE actually blushed. I went over to the phone and had the operator try to get me Westfall. She couldn't. Nobody seemed to know where Westfall was.

"Well, you can get him tomorrow morning. Do that."

"All right, I will. But I never thought I could bring myself to look at him."

"You could afford to ogle the Devil himself for thirty grand. My guess is Westfall will hand it to you on a silver platter."

"Well, I'm glad I came to see you."

"Who told you you'd find me here?"

"Captain Hinchman. I think he wanted to get rid of me."

"Then he was nuts. Suppose I pick you up for dinner at eight?"

She blushed again and said she thought that would be all right. I hoped I'd make it. It was six-thirty then. I found Carl Bronson's name in the phone book and got a call in to his house.

"Mr. Bronson will see no one," somebody told me.

"He'll see me. I'm from the attorney general's office. Tell him to stick around till I get there."

It took half an hour to do that. The Bronson place was in a swank residential development a few miles out. A maid led me through the house and out onto the terrace. Bronson was lounging in a summer chair.

"Sorry to bother you, Mr. Bronson, but I've got to. You see you're the only witness to Ditson's plunge."

"That's right. I don't intend to stand in the way of an investigation. I'll gladly tell you anything I know. I want somebody to pay for this."

He looked as if he had been taking it pretty hard. And from Sheila Brown's pictures in the papers, it looked as if he had plenty of right to take it that way. Bronson himself wasn't much to look at—he had one of those faces that look like a mask for a calculating machine. His business was investment brokerage, so he was in character.

He was also a little bald, a fact which hadn't shown up in his newspaper photo. I guessed his age to be an old thirty-seven. Sheila Brown had been twenty-two. I charged the incongruity up to the manpower shortage and let it go at that.

"The only thing I want to establish," I told Bronson, "is whether Ditson definitely jumped."

Bronson gave me a long, thoughtful look.

"What makes you think he didn't?"

"A fair question. I've heard a rumor that Westfall sent thirty thousand bucks by way of a couple of his mugs to the Maramoor. The mugs haven't shown up since. I thought maybe they got the bright idea of heaving Ditson out of the window and making it look like suicide. That way he wouldn't be around to squawk about not getting the thirty thousand."

Bronson looked me over as though I had large ears.

"But that's preposterous! The money didn't show up after Ditson's suicide. Westfall must know they didn't deliver it, so they certainly gained nothing by killing Ditson, assuming your theory is correct, which it isn't."

"Oh, it isn't? You know that, do you?"

"Of course. I've already told my story many times. Ditson wasn't pushed, he jumped. I saw him. He was standing in the window. He just stepped off. Then he turned over and over. His head was down when he—when—"

Bronson covered his face with his hands.

"For God's sake, Corbett, why make me go into that?"

"I'm sorry. I only thought that Westfall's boys might have counted on his thinking the cops who searched the room afterward might have got the thirty grand."

"Then why haven't they shown up? They can't be banking on any such idea, otherwise they would."

"I guess I'll have to agree on that. But I thought the idea was worth running down. After all, I don't have a lot to go on."

"Well, I hope you raise hell in this town. I've been fed up for years with the bunch of crooks running it."

"Then you didn't approve of your fiancée going to the Silver Dollar?"

Bronson straightened. "Who told you she did?"

"She did go there, didn't she?"

"Yes, but not with me. I wouldn't be caught dead inside one of those joints. I can't afford it, in my business. Pretty soon people who let

me handle their money would begin to wonder if I was gambling it away."

"Then who took Miss Brown there?"

"Her brother. He practically lives at the Silver Dollar, I hear. Dwight's a nice boy, but he makes a fool of himself. I give him five years, and he'll have his inheritance down the sewer. And Sheila's, too, now that she's gone."

I got up. "Well, thanks. I'm glad I got to talk to you, though you've knocked my bright idea in the head. I'm sorry about your loss, really I am."

"Thanks. Give 'em hell. Drive all those rotten crooks out of town!"

"I'll do my best."

CHAPTER TWO

Double Take

MARY DITSON looked so cute when I picked her up at the Broadhurst that I wished I'd bothered to shave. I tried to make up for it by taking her to the swellest place in town, the Maramoor Ionian Room. Of course it all went on the expense account.

"Who was your father's worst enemy?" I asked her.

"Himself."

"I know, but I mean other people. Did he have any serious enemies?"

"I'm positive he didn't have. There wasn't a soul in our town who didn't love Dad—and pity him. The poor man thought he was a super gambler. Actually he never won in all his life."

"This town you lived in across the state line—it's not very big, is it?"

"Ten thousand. Nobody very rich. Dad was a pretty shrewd real estate operator—he had to be to make up for his gambling losses. I worked in his office and tried to keep him in line."

"Couldn't he have made somebody pretty mad on some of his real estate deals?"

"Say, what are you driving at?"

"An answer to my question."

"Well, I suppose there were people who got peeved. Like Jim Newell. He really was burned up for a while when he found how much Dad would have given him when he bought his building for that chain store."

"Now we're getting somewhere! Where's this Jim Newell now?"

"Greenlawn Cemetery. I think that transaction killed him."

"Yes, it's killing me, too! So the guy's dead! Well, did he ever make anybody mad who's still alive?"

"I just can't think of anybody offhand."

"Suppose you work on it."

"You really suspect foul play? You really think somebody might have murdered Dad?"

"I've just got a hunch. Suppose the thirty thousand was actually paid to him. He'd advertised in all the newspapers that he was going to commit suicide. That made a perfect set-up for anybody who wanted to come along, pick up the thirty grand and toss him out of the window."

"But Mr. Bronson saw him jump!"

"He thinks he did. But remember that your father's falling body killed his girl. My bet is that Bronson has no very clear idea of what happened. A shock like that addles your brain. Besides, even if his girl hadn't been killed, I wouldn't put too much stock in his story. When I went to FBI school I turned in a report of a fake killing that said five shots were fired. There were only three. And I'm supposed to be a detective!"

I thought maybe I'd said the wrong thing then, for she gave me an odd look.

"Suppose we get out of this joint. I only brought you here because it's expensive. I think it smells. We should be able to find a nice place that isn't so stuffy."

"I'm glad you said that. Let's try the Silver Dollar."

I gave her a double-take. "But it's closed!"

"Only the gambling room part. The nightclub side is still running. I found that out."

She'd also found out the Silver Dollar was on the south edge of Midtown, actually just over the corporation line. The cab had hauled us about five blocks before I noticed the tail.

IT WAS one of those cabs that are converted passenger cars. There was no glass partition between us and the driver. I said: "Fellow, is there any place between here and the Silver Dollar that's nice and quiet?"

Mary Ditson said: "Why, Mr. Corbett, I—"

"Don't get any wrong ideas," I told her. "We're being followed. I'd like to find out why." Again I addressed the driver. "Have you thought of some place by now?"

He turned around, about half scared.

"Listen, mister, what are you getting me into?"

"A ten-spot tip. Don't get hot and bothered. I'm the law." I flashed my badge.

He seemed to breathe easier. "There won't be any shooting?"

"If there is, I'll be doing it. Now let me know when you're about to turn off and where you're going to stop."

The driver turned off at one of those cross-streets that run through undeveloped areas. When he saw the tail turn after us, he really got a bad case of jitters.

"Gee, I don't think I want any part of this! Those guys are after you!"

"Twenty dollars."

"Well, I don't suppose I can turn down dough like that. It'll be when we go under the Pennsy overhead. I'll stop real quick just on the other side of that."

I turned to Mary Ditson. "How about you? You want out now?"

"I—I'll stay! Maybe something important's going to happen!"

I didn't know how important it was going to be, but I made up my mind it wasn't going to be sad for me. When the cabbie pulled up and stopped, the other car pulled up beside us and stopped as I had anticipated. By that time I had the cab door open and my .380 out of its shoulder holster. The windows on the other car were down, and I stuck the .380's muzzle to within six inches of the big guy's brain.

The big guy was sitting in the front at the right. "Hold it, fellow," he said, "we only wanted to talk—privately."

"That's right," chimed in a middle-aged man at the wheel. "We can help you, Mr. Corbett. That's all we want to do, just help you."

"Then why did you tail me down a back road? Why didn't you come to my room at the hotel?"

"We're hiding out, Mr. Corbett. We couldn't come to the Maramoor on account of Westfall spotting us. So we had to watch our chance to see you."

"Then you're the guys Westfall sent over with the thirty grand."

"That's right, Mr. Corbett. We delivered it all right. We delivered every cent of it at nine o'clock. Parker here'll bear me out, and I'll vouch for him. My name's Souders."

"Why shouldn't you boys back up each other's story? Thirty grand split two ways is still a nice deal for each of you."

"But if we had the dough, why'd we stick around here? Why'd we talk to you?"

"Go on. Let's have the talk."

"Well, that's all there is. We gave Ditson the money. He was happy as hell about it. He was so happy he started laughing like he was crazy, and he wound up crying. We beat it, it was so embarrassing."

"Then where'd the money get to?"

Souders exchanged a glance with Parker. Parker took a deep breath and nodded.

"Hinchman. He's the guy who was in charge of the investigation. We stuck around long enough to see that—after we'd heard what had happened. This Hinchman is a strictly no good deal. We ought to know. We've been handling Westfall's payoffs long enough to know Hinchman's got his hand out almost as far as the chief's and the sheriff's."

"How about the county D. A.? He like his gravy, too?"

The boys exchanged another pair of glances.

"What have you got on your mind?"

"An out for you fellows. Westfall'll never

believe your story about delivering that thirty grand. If he catches you, you're through. You know that. Your only out is to turn state's evidence. You'll put Westfall, the crooked cops, the sheriff and even the D. A. where they won't be able to bother you again. It's the only way."

The boys remained silent. Finally Parker, who had done the listening, said: "We'll have to have a little time to think that deal over. That makes us squealers."

"Live squealers. Think it over. When you're ready, call me at the Maran Moor."



WHEN they'd gone and I was back in the cab, Mary Ditson said:

"Why did you let them go? Why didn't you arrest them?"

"That's what they wanted.

They daren't turn themselves in to the local law because the local law is one of Westfall's subsidiaries. They figured they'd be safe in my hands. If I let them sweat it out a little longer they'll be ready to upset the whole applecart. Then I can hand the town over to Keever on a silver platter."

The cab was still standing there, so I said to the driver: It's all over, fellow. Get going."

He turned around. His face was bathed in perspiration. His lower lip trembled.

"My God, why didn't you tell me them guys was going to be Stonie Parker and Punch Souders? They're the toughest boys Spain Westfall's got! They might have massacred us all!"

"Not a chance. They were the tamest pair of punks I ever saw in my life. That means there's somebody working for Westfall who's tougher than they are. Got any idea who that could be?"

The driver shook his head. "I never heard of anybody that tough!"

He got the cab going, leaving a few teeth on the gears. When we got to the Silver Dollar, I paid him his fare and his twenty. He looked as if he thought he'd earned it. He got away from us as fast as his recaps would carry him.

There's no use in my describing the Silver Dollar, because you've been in as many of those places as I have, and they're all pretty much alike. The night club proper is merely a garish come-on for the annex where the real dough is made. Westfall had rigged up a slightly more elaborate club than the average, and there were sixteen pieces in the band.

It was still the kind of corny band you expect in such places, doing a bad imitation of Wayne King doing a bad imitation of Guy Lombardo. I saw that Mary Ditson was pleasantly surprised and guessed she'd been pretty much of a home

girl. I wondered if she was going to order cokes—she'd passed up the wine list at dinner.

But she drank like a little lady. Insofar as I was concerned the pipes were pretty dry, and I brought matters up to date. After my third double, Westfall came over to our table.

"Mind if I sit down?"

"Not at all. Miss Ditson, Spain Westfall."

Westfall paled. Mary Ditson dittoed. Westfall recovered first and sat down.

"Miss Ditson, I'm very sorry for what happened. I assume complete responsibility. The money your father had lost was to have been refunded to him by two of my most trusted men. They absconded, and the consequence was a terrible tragedy. I know I can't bring back your father, but I do want to return personally to you the money he lost. You can come with me to my office now and get it, or my lawyers can give it to you in the morning as I'd already planned."

Mary Ditson looked at him as if she were in a trance.

I caught the look in her eyes and said: "Don't think he's making a generous gesture, Mary. He knows you can collect legally, and he's beating the gun. His voluntary payment will be noised around, and everybody will say: 'What a white guy Spain Westfall is.' He's taking very little chance admitting your father lost the money in the Silver Dollar, because a gambling rap is strictly small time. It's the conspiracy and bribery charge that bothers a big shot like Westfall, and he knows he's in the clear on that."

Westfall eyed me coldly.

"That's right, Corbett. You're beginning to get a little bit on my nerves. But you're not worrying me a nickel's worth. I told you I'd heard about you, and I had. But what I hear is you use your gun more than your brains. Try and raise a stink in Midtown and see how fast you get heaved out of it!"

He turned back to Mary Ditson and asked: "Do you want the money now or in the morning?"

"Take it now," I told her. She was plainly flabbergasted.

"But thirty thousand dollars! That's such a lot of money to carry, especially at night! Isn't there danger?"

"There's more danger Westfall might be in no position to pay off in the morning. A bird in the hand, you know. Besides, I'll see you don't lose the thirty thousand."

Westfall gave me another cold look. Then he got up, and we followed him into his office. It was nothing so elaborate as his main headquarters downtown, but still it was strictly big time. He gave Mary her money in thirty bills and took a receipt for them.

"If you'll take my advice," said Westfall, "you'll go right back to your hotel and put

that money in the safe. I'll send along a couple of my boys, if you like."

"I don't like," I said. "The last time a couple of your boys got close to thirty grand they succumbed to wanderlust. I'll do all the necessary bodyguarding in this case."

Westfall shrugged. We went out through the club and took the only waiting cab. I'll admit I had a few perambulating palpitations. It wouldn't look so good if somebody came along and I let them take those nice clean bills out of Mary's handbag. The driver started back downtown, but I said: "Let's take a ride out into the country. Take it pretty slow and easy."

IF THE driver knew anything about a war going on he didn't hint it. He took us about two miles out, and when we came to a cross-road, I said: "Turn here."

Mary Ditson eyed me with mingled wonder and suspicion while the cab turned down the cross-road. But she didn't say anything until the road began to dip and twist.

"What is your idea? We're going away from my hotel, not back to it!"

"Sure. Westfall wouldn't pull anything so corny as to put a tail on us at the Silver Dollar. If he has any ideas at all, the tail would pick us up on the way downtown. This way we should cross him up."

"But why would he have anyone follow us?"

"To see that nobody took the thirty grand away from you."

"Well what's the matter with that?"

"Nothing much except that I want it. Hand it over."

She sucked in her breath in a short gasp.

"You crook! Why, I'll bet you aren't Ben Corbett at all! You're somebody else just pretending you're him!"

"Hey!" said the driver, slowing almost to a stop. "What goes on back there?"

"Keep out of this, bub," I told him. "This is no affair of yours."

Mary Ditson clutched her handbag tightly.

"You're not going to get away with this!"

"Wrong again. It's *you* who aren't going to get away with it."

"I—I don't know what you mean!" Her eyes widened as if she suddenly saw the light. "I know—you think I'm *not* Mary Ditson, that I'm just pretending I'm she. That's what you think, isn't it?"

"Oh, no, you're Mary Ditson, all right. It's just that I don't want to see a swindle pulled, even if it's on a racketeer like Westfall. Come clean, Mary—tonight's the second time you've collected your father's gambling loss."

"You—you're crazy! Why would Westfall pay me off twice?"

"Because he didn't know he was doing it. He doesn't believe Parker and Souders delivered the cash to your father's hotel room—I

do. I think it was you who carried it out of there. You must have been there at the time, or else you came right over when he phoned you the good news."

Mary Ditson forced a laugh. "That's good! He got the money at nine o'clock and ten minutes later I was there to collect it from him! And all away across the state line!"

I laughed long and loud. Mary Ditson said: "What are you laughing at?"

"These screwball hunches of mine. Take this one. I had a hunch you might have been in Midtown to pick up the dough, but then there were other candidates. So what happens? You listen three times to as many stories about the thirty grand being delivered to your father's hotel room. You heard me tell it, you heard Parker and Souders tell it, and you heard Westfall tell it. Nobody said anything about what time the money was supposed to have been delivered. Nobody said it was nine o'clock or that it was ten minutes before your father's alleged suicide. Yet you just asked me how you could have traveled from your home town across the state line to Midtown in ten minutes, after a phone call at nine!"

Again Mary's breath went in fast. I reached over and found no resistance when I took the bag away from her. I removed the bills, stuffed them into my inside coat pocket and handed back the bag.

I said, mainly for the benefit of the cab driver: "You're probably one of Westfall's stooges, and you may as well tell him what you overheard. You can also tell him he can have his dough if he comes to my hotel in the morning."

He turned at the next cross-road and headed back toward town. Mary was crying her eyes out by this time. I took an armful of her.

"Think nothing of it, baby. Your old man got a bum break, and nobody will blame you for trying to take a rat like Westfall. My only beef is that your keeping mum was keeping me in doubt about whether I was working on a suicide or a murder. You should have thought of that."

She whimpered all the more, but didn't try to break away. Women are like cats—you can't hate them because you can't train them to be as dependable as dogs.



HE tears were gone by the time we reached the Broadhurst. The cab driver had heard plenty, so I took Mary into the lobby and found a quiet corner, before I asked any more questions.

"O. K., Mary. Let's hear what happened."

"There's nothing much. Those men—I didn't

see them—they stopped in the vestibule and delivered the money. They told Dad to stop squawking and get out of town. They didn't ask for a receipt. I didn't understand that."

"They were trusted payoff men for Westfall," I told her. "They never took receipts. Nobody would give them any. So they didn't ask your father for one because the habit was too strong."

"Well, I made Dad give me the money. I took it to the Broadhurst and the clerk put it in a safe. Of course he didn't know what was in the envelope I gave him—it was just thirty bills, like the second package."

"I felt pretty wonderful, knowing Dad had got his money back. I went out to a movie. Then when I came out I saw Dad's suicide in the headlines. I didn't know what to think. I couldn't understand why he would commit suicide. I couldn't believe anybody had murdered him, because he hadn't any money."

"Well, you knew it had to be one or the other."

"Of course. But I didn't know why it would be one or the other. I waited till next day, then I went to the morgue. They wouldn't let me claim the body. They treated me terribly—it's plain that everyone I saw was working for the gamblers."

"I went to police headquarters, and it was the same story there. I suppose I'd have told about the thirty thousand if anybody had treated me half-way decent. But everybody seemed to be trying to brush me out of his hair. A whole day passed with nothing done."

"Then today, I found you were in the picture. Hinchman evidently thought he was getting rid of me by sending me to you—and by that time I was bitter. I didn't know why Dad had jumped from that window, but I knew he wouldn't have done it if it hadn't been for Spain Westfall's gambling place."

"I remembered the men hadn't gotten a receipt. Then you told me Westfall himself believed that the money had never been delivered—that the messengers had gone away with it. So I thought I'd get even with Westfall and collect twice!"

"Sure it wasn't so much revenge as the money?"

"Why not the money?"

"Atta girl! I don't blame you for a little opportunism, only you sure played the devil with solving your father's murder."

"You really think it was murder?"

"Why would your father jump when he'd got his money back?"

"But if he didn't have the money, why should anyone kill him?"

"Several things might have happened. The murderer might have killed him in an attempt to rob him. He might have killed him while torturing him to make him tell where the money was."

"But in both cases the murderer would have to think he had the money!"

"Right. Parker and Souders had reason to believe he had it. So did Westfall and maybe a half-dozen or more of his stooges including Hinchman. And then there was you."

"Me! Why, you can't—"

"No, I don't think you killed your father for thirty grand, though even a girl your size could have pushed him out of the window."

"Well, thanks. I suppose after what I tried to do to Westfall, you'd be justified in thinking anything of me—even murder."

"Well, I don't, but I've an open mind. Run along to bed now, and I'll see you in the morning."

My cab driver hadn't waited for his fare, which had been plenty. He had beat it back to the Silver Dollar to tell all to Westfall and collect an appropriate bonus. I got another cab. It was ten-thirty when I walked into the Maramoor lobby. I went to a pay phone, closed the booth and called the Silver Dollar. I asked for Westfall, and got him.

"Ditson had his payoff," I told him. "The girl has the money."

"So I heard," said Westfall. "Only my tip is you've got the double payoff."

"Your tip's right. I'm holding it, but you'll get it back soon enough. I want you to keep it under your hat for a little while."

"Anything you say. I feel sorry about my lack of faith in my boys. They were good boys. It's too bad I can't apologize to them."

"Oh, you can't? Why not?"

"A while ago they went over Briarton Cliff in their car. A sheer drop of over a hundred feet. It's a shame."

"Yes, it's a shame."

I hung up. I'd counted on Parker and Souders contacting me by this time. Now they'd do no talking, and it was going to be tough getting the indictments Keever had ordered.

I thought I'd concentrate on a different indictment. Westfall had shown his nasty temper. The hot-seat would sweat it out of him. Parker and Souders had been muggs, but they had also been human beings, and there's a law.

I stopped at the hotel safe and deposited the thirty grand. Then I went up to my room. I hadn't much more than turned on the lights when there was a visitor in the doorway.

"Mr. Corbett," he said. "I'm Dwight Brown, Sheila Brown's brother."

"Oh, come in. How'd you happen along?"

"Carl Bronson told me about your visit. It wasn't hard locating you. I've been waiting for an hour in the lobby."

"Then you must have something important to say."

"I have. Sheila's death has been a terrible shock to me. But it's opened my eyes to a great many things."

"To what?"

"To the fact that Midtown's a rotten place so long as there are rats like Spain Westfall!"

"I get it. You used to be one of his best customers—now you blame him for your sister's death."

"Oh, I know he wasn't directly responsible. His connection was relatively remote. But if Ditson hadn't been a sucker at the Silver Dollar, he wouldn't have committed suicide. And if there hadn't been any Silver Dollar, he wouldn't have been a sucker. And if there hadn't been any Spain Westfall, there wouldn't have been a Silver Dollar."

That was the way he looked at it, and I couldn't blame him.

"Well, what do you want to do about it?"

"I want to bust the whole racket wide open. And I can do it!"

CHAPTER THREE

Killing Takes Practice



WENT over and locked my door. I got a bottle out of my bag and poured doubles. There were only two glasses—if Brown wanted a chaser, he could get it for himself. I didn't need one. We drank.

"Well, son, let's have it."

"I've got enough on Westfall and Hinchman to put both of them away for keeps. You see, I've kind of palled around with Westfall. I think it flattered him to have me around. My family's always been tops in this town. I think Westfall might have had social ideas in the back of his head. He talked of retiring when the war boom is over."

Brown paused, looked around nervously.

"Mind if I have another?"

I got him another. I was on pins and needles, and forgot to pour one for myself, a rare thing.

"Yes, I've been pretty close to Westfall. Maybe you know how openly he plays the thing. A couple of summers back when the Reform Committee got things closed up for a couple of months he even ran an ad in the papers. It said: 'Owing to excessive heat, the south wing of the Silver Dollar will be closed for the remainder of the summer.' Just like that."

"Why shouldn't he play it open? With his protection he owns the town."

"Sure. The chief of police, the sheriff and the D. A. are just hired help to him. Hinchman's the boy who keeps them in line. He got the chief out of town as soon as the Ditson thing broke—he didn't want a weak sister in his way. Even Westfall's men don't suspect Hinchman's high man because the boss himself handles most of his payoffs."

"I hope you aren't just talking. You said something about being able to back this up."

"Sure I can. I've seen Hinchman paid off a dozen times. Both he and Westfall took me for granted."

"Is that all you've got—your word against theirs?"

"Hell, no! One day last summer I went fishing with Hinchman. He threw his coat over the back of the seat. Seven bank notes fell out on the car floor. They were on that many different banks and in that many different names. Hinchman didn't notice them. I jotted down the data on the back of an envelope. I figured the information might come in handy some time."

"For blackmailing Westfall into paying back your losses, maybe?"

"No. You must have been listening to Carl Bronson. According to him I'm a hopeless spendthrift gambling away my inheritance. Actually it's almost intact. Westfall lets me win enough almost to break even. I just pay dues at the Silver Dollar. But I think maybe my bank account data might come in handy if Westfall decided to drop me and cash in real quick."

"But you've got the goods on Hinchman, not Westfall."

Brown looked me over. "You think Hinchman will take his rap alone? You think he hasn't got enough on Westfall to take him with him? Break Hinchman, and you break the racket, too."

"Well, the dope on the bank books combined with your testimony about the payoffs should do the trick if handled rightly—if you should live that long. A couple of Westfall's boys, Parker and Souders, had some idea earlier in the evening. They went over Briarton Cliff. A sad accident."

Brown eyed me thoughtfully. "So Stonie and Punch were going to sing? Westfall couldn't have known that. They were on his list because they ran out with the booty to be handed back to Ditson."

"I know. But you'll get the same treatment if Westfall finds out you've been to see me. Is there any place you can hide out? Surely a young buck like you would have an address not in a telephone book."

"I do. It's a lodge in the hills out beyond Briarton Cliff. Nobody—no man, I mean, knows where it is."

"Fine. Now, get out of here as fast as you can, only first draw me a diagram."

Brown drew a crude one on a telephone pad and explained it.

Without a map it would take six squirrels and a finance company collector to find the lodge, it was that far back in the woods. I hoped Brown wasn't kidding himself about its secrecy and that he wouldn't be tailed. I don't think I mentioned that he was a nice looking

chap, not nearly the sad sister Carl Bronson had described him to be. Only I couldn't forget that he might have dropped more dough at the Silver Dollar than he'd let on and that he seemed to know all about Westfall's business. It was ghastly to think that in trying to rob Ditson he had killed his own sister!

THE operator didn't take long to get Keever. I gave it to him fast in a kind of double-talk we used, and he knew the case was hot. "Hold everything till I get there," he said. "I'll round up a car full of detectives, and we'll take the town over."

"I guess you've never met Hinchman. It'll take more dicks than you can bring in a train."

"I'll have a warrant for Hinchman before a shyster can say habeas corpus! Only chase out to Brown's and keep him on ice. I can't understand why you let him out of your sight. Are you drunk?"

"Definitely not. By the time you get here I'll have not only Brown on ice but Ditson's murderer as well."

Keever didn't believe me, but underestimating me is an old habit with him. I figured it would take him a good two hours to round up the five goons he'd hired on state pay to wear badges and pass themselves off as investigators, and get to Midtown. Far from taking over

Midtown, those bums couldn't have taken over an atoll if it had been defended by a cockroach.

I figured I had to work pretty fast. I took the elevator down and started across the lobby. A bulky form stopped me.

"Just a minute," said Hinchman. "I was just coming to see you. Westfall told me about the Ditson girl having the thirty grand. I'm booking her for murder. She must have figured that pushing her old man out of a window was a sure way to keep him from losing the dough all over again."

"O. K., only why do you have to see me first? Can't you pinch a hundred and twelve pounds of pin-up without help from the A. G.'s office?"

"I came for that second thirty grand, Corbett. It's evidence."

"That's why I'm keeping it in the hotel safe. The clerk looks honest."

"I suppose I don't."

When we finally stopped arguing and got to the Broadhurst, Mary Ditson was gone and so was her thirty grand.

"I knew it!" said Hinchman. "She took a powder. She killed her old man—this proves it!"

"Maybe. Couldn't be that Westfall dropped by and picked her up?"

"A snatch? Not Westfall. He's strictly legit."

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"I suppose there's nothing more legit than a little piece of murder. Don't tell me you've forgotten about Parker and Souders going over the cliff."

"Dozens of people have gone over it. They haven't invented a guard rail strong enough to hold the drunks. Those two boys were soaked all the time."

"They weren't tonight before they had their 'accident.' They were cold sober when they told me they'd let me know about turning state's evidence."

Hinchman paled. Then he quickly recovered.

"They didn't know nothing. But this Ditson girl does. If it ain't too late to stop her lamming out of town, I'll have her confession signed and sealed in a matter of hours."

He had a fair chance at that, for the Broadhurst clerk said she'd only checked out ten minutes before. He ran out with my blessing, for the Ditson dame had pulled a honey, running out like that. I believed Hinchman about Westfall not having the guts for a snatch. Dealing with me was going to be tough enough, but dealing with the FBI would be even tougher. I'm a modest little devil at that.



CAB hauled me out to Carl Bronson's. He was still up.

"I know there's no use in my going to bed, Corbett. I can't sleep for thinking of Sheila." He buried his hands in his face.

"I want you to think some more. Whether I crack this case tonight depends on you. You're the only eye-witness of Ditson's leap that I know of. Now, get this—Ditson didn't dive, he was pushed."

Bronson's brows lifted in incredulous amazement.

"But I tell you, I saw him! Nobody was there in the window with him! He was standing on the sill, and he stepped off!"

"You're cockeyed. You think you saw him step off because you were psychologically unprepared to see anything else. Usually when somebody goes out the window of a building it's under his own power. It's rarely a case of murder. So your prejudiced brain projected an image instead of a picture of the real thing. You've got to shake up that image and let the parts fall back where they belong. Then maybe you'll see somebody there in the window with Ditson or at least somebody's hands and arms."

Bronson eyed me speculatively. "If you know what you're talking about—and I think you don't—you're really trying to tell me that psychoanalysis would clear my memory."

"That's a ten-dollar word for it. Do it. Then

Over My Dead Booty

maybe we'll get someplace, as the saying goes."

I watched while Bronson sat back and rubbed the bridge of his nose in his version of a mental kick in the pants. Suddenly he sat up straight.

"But this whole thing's crazy! Why should anyone kill Ditson? He was penniless. I gather that he had no enemies."

"I'll bring you up to date, Bronson. Ditson had been paid off. His daughter was there at the time, and she socked the dough in her purse. Later she laid it away in the hotel safe, then she got another idea and took a ride. Hinchman should catch her. But even if he doesn't, the fact remains that Ditson was paid off. His murderer might not have known about his daughter taking the money away. So he might have sapped him too hard and tossed him onto the asphalt to cover up."

Bronson was visibly impressed.

"That does change things. I'll think harder now."

He went back to rubbing his nose again. I knew he could rub the skin away without changing the picture he carried in his mind. So I said: "Let's go talk to Dwight Brown. He's thrown in with me. Maybe he can help you."

Bronson looked up. "Dwight? You mean he's fallen out with Westfall over this? Say, that's serious. When Dwight got drunk he used to tell me a few things he knew about Westfall and his crowd. Westfall is a tough character to fall out with."

"It's all right. Dwight's in a hidden lodge out beyond Briarton Cliff."

"Impossible! He doesn't have such a place!"

"That's why he has it, because it's impossible that he should have it. You surely know the facts of life, Mr. Bronson."

Bronson seemed shocked at such discretion. But he didn't argue. He got a hat, and backed his car out of the garage. I paid off my cab and climbed in with him. Then I got out Dwight's map and gave directions.

THERE was a mob of cars parked around Briarton Cliff. It seemed every neighbor had driven over to see the wreck about a hundred and forty feet below. The cliff was no grade—it was a rock ledge dropping sheerly. A fire burned briskly below.

"Get along!" said a highway patrolman as I signaled Bronson to stop.

I flashed my badge and said: "How come the fire? The boys went over a long time ago."

"Lots of rubbish down there. There were signs up forbidding dumping, but people dumped anyway. This is no main road—people had plenty of chance."

I took a look at the guard rail. I'm no engi-

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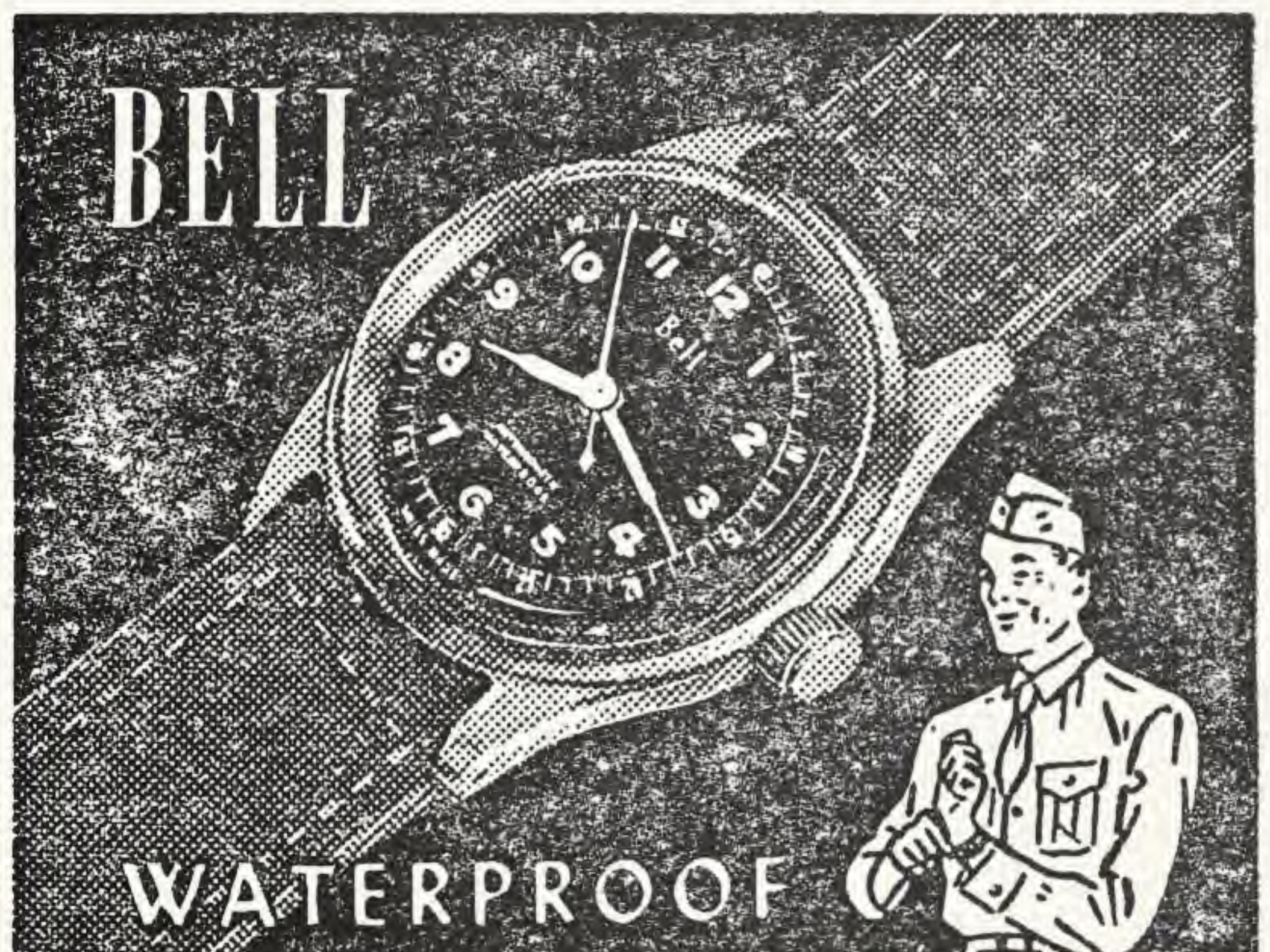
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neer, but I'd say the highway department had done its darnedest here. To go through that rail a car would have to be traveling at least sixty. My professional curiosity was aroused. I wondered how Westfall's expert had managed it.

"Get along," I told Bronson. "I haven't much faith in this map. We may be all night finding Dwight."

We weren't quite that long. But we were a good hour and a half checking false leads consisting of by-roads that Dwight had forgotten to mark. Finally we parked beside what had to be the lodge. At least there was a light inside, and Bronson identified Dwight's car.

We barged right in. Dwight wasn't alone. He was sitting at his fireplace, a highball in hand. Opposite him sat Mary Ditson. She also held a highball glass. It was a cozy picture.

"Come in, gentlemen," said Dwight. "Make yourselves at home."

"Well," said Bronson with scorn run through with envy, "you're in character, all right! Imagine bringing a girl here with your sister dead only two days!"

"Don't break an ankle jumping at conclusions," said Dwight. "This is Mary Ditson, the daughter of Westfall's victim. Mary, this stuffed shirt is Carl Bronson. Not having to marry him is the only break poor Sheila got."

"Dwight! You're drunk!"

"I never had a soberer thought. Mr. Corbett, I hope you'll forgive my bringing Mary here. I thought she'd be safer, and when I saw that mess at Briarton Cliff, I was glad I'd brought her along. Westfall is desperate. He knows he's fighting for his life. So I hope you'll understand why I brought Mary."

"Sure, I guessed as much," I said without batting an eye. I looked around the joint with no little admiration. Some of Dwight's female companions must have put in residence, for the place had a touch no mere man could give it. But Bronson had different ideas.

"That Picasso is Sheila's! I know because I gave it to her! She told me she'd hung it in her room! What's it doing here?"

Dwight apparently got some enjoyment out of saying: "Sheila liked to come here, too. It was her hide-out as well as mine. No bromide ever beat a path to our door. We took turn-about and never got in each other's way. You'd have liked Sheila, if you'd only known her."

Bronson reddened. "Damn you, Dwight, you've no right to talk like that! Sheila and I were engaged to be married. She was wearing my ring when she died!"

"Sure, but she was still kidding you. She didn't want to let you down hard and figured you'd tire out if she stalled long enough. It's all in her diary she kept out here. I didn't get

Over My Dead Booty

very far, only a few pages. Brother, did she have your number!"

Bronson could take it no longer. He reached Dwight in two long strides, swung a haymaker that passed a foot over Dwight's ducking head and took a pair of hooks into his middle that put him on his pants. I regarded Dwight with new respect.

Bronson didn't look angry any more. He looked sick. He was sick in the bathroom after he'd staggered through a bedroom to it.

"I told him I wanted to shake up his memory," I said. "If that doesn't do it, nothing will."

Bronson was taking his time coming out of the bath, which was between the two bedrooms in the rear, but I figured that if I'd suffered a defeat like his, I'd want to spend some time there, too. I forgot all about Bronson when Keever walked in flanked by Hinchman and Westfall.

For one of the few times in my life I regarded Keever with genuine, unaffected admiration.

"For crying out loud! It took Bronson and me all night to find this place with a map! How the devil did you find it?"

"Elementary, my dear Corbett. I merely wired the county auditor to open up his records, spot any hill country land in the name of Dwight Brown. He found the place, loaned me a map out of his office. Then I picked up Westfall and Hinchman."

I gasped: "But you didn't have time to get a warrant!"

"Why should I? You promised you'd have Ditson's murderer by the time I got here. Naturally it's to Westfall and Hinchman's interest to learn that Ditson was no suicide after all. Come, Corbett, produce your killer."

"Let's start with a preliminary rather than the main go," I said. "This is Dwight Brown—Dwight, feel honored at meeting Attorney General Burton H. Keever!" Keever scowled at me and smiled at Dwight. "Dwight has a little piece to speak. Don't miss any lines, Dwight."

Dwight spoke his piece while I stood by with leveled .380. I wasn't impressed by the flattened noses of Keever's goons in the window. They knew how to surround the lodge—they'd been to the movies.



HINCHMAN broke quickly. Dwight had read his memo only half-way through when he turned to Keever and nodded.

"That's enough. I'll make a deal."

"Fine," said Keever, then he yelled. Westfall had lost

his head. Keever's goons must have missed the flat .32 automatic that he pulled out from under

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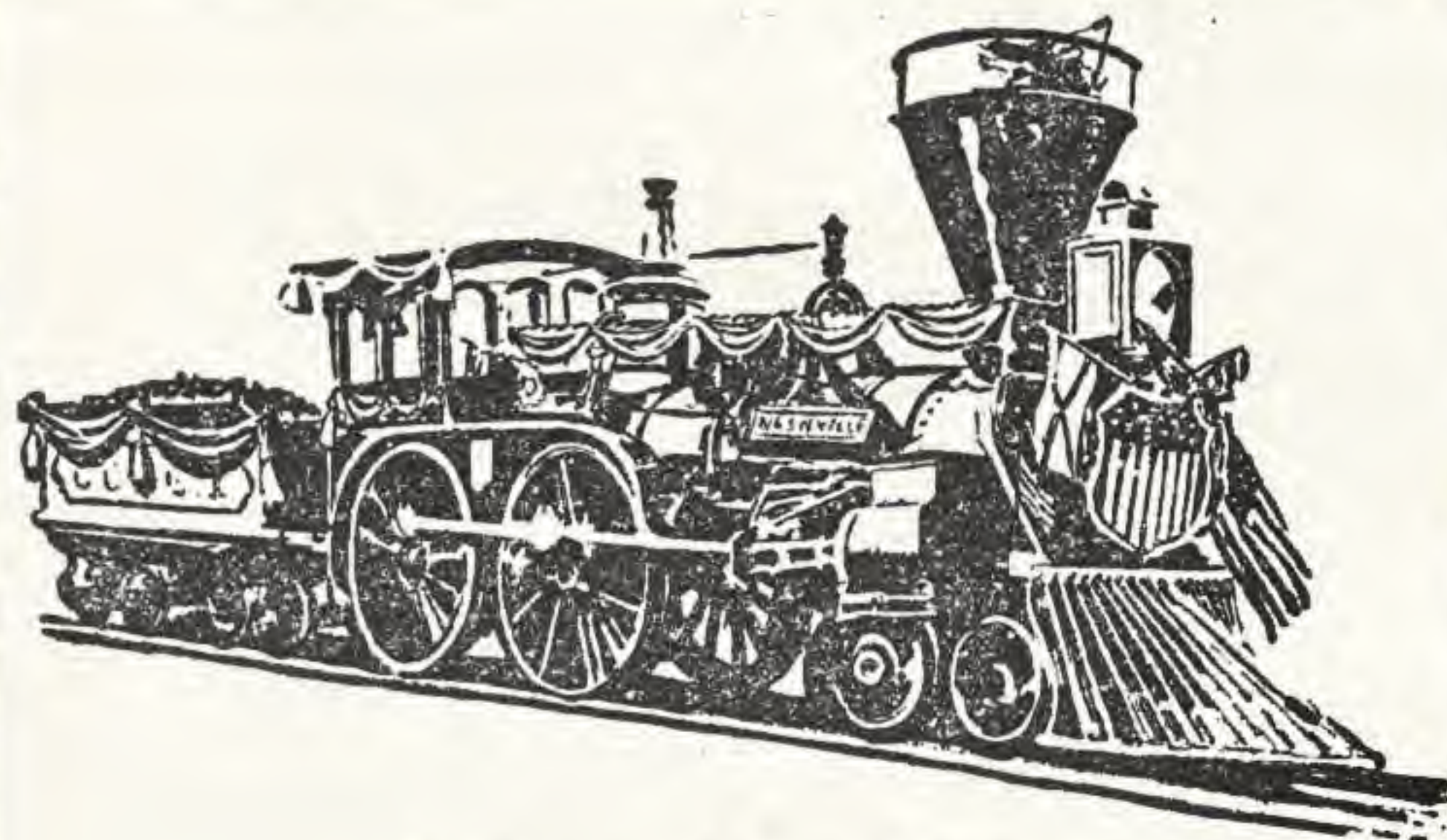
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his belt. My .380 got in the first and only word, and Westfall's mouth hung open. He put his hands over his belly, the .32 dropping to the floor. Then Westfall sat down.

I've read about guys who shoot guns out of other guys' hands, but if you haven't much time the belly is a bigger target. Westfall passed out cold, and I said: "Better get him to a doc—he may want to do a little talking before his life leaks out of all those holes inside him."

"He won't have to talk!" Hinchman shouted hysterically. "I know everything that he knows! I'll bust up every racket in town!"

"You'll tell us who killed Parker and Souders?"

"Sure, they were Westfall's boys. He ordered it. I had absolutely nothing to do with it!"

"And who killed Ditson?"

Hinchman shook his head vigorously.

"Honest to God, I don't know who did that! I actually thought you'd brought me here to turn him up!"

Keever eyed me sharply. "You said you'd turn him up, Ben!"

I hedged. "Well, aren't you getting your money's worth? You passed Briarton Cliff on the way here. I've cracked that case. Aren't you satisfied with the progress?"

"Scarcely," said Keever. "After all, this thing started with Ditson's murder, and it's still unsolved. By the way, why's that fire still burning at the cliff? It started hours ago."

"The rubbish dumped there," Dwight volunteered. "Everybody does it." He laughed. "Why, only a couple of days ago, I came along and found my stuffed-shirted prospective brother-in-law dumping a big bundle there."

"How big?" I yelled.

Startled, Dwight replied: "A hell of a big bundle. Must have weighed a hundred and fifty pounds I'd say from the way he was lifting it."

"The diary!" I yelled again. Then I raced into a bedroom and beyond into the bath. The door was locked, but the smoke fumes leaked through. The lock broke out with my second try, and my momentum carried me into Bronson. I tried to put out the fire first. When Bronson intervened I let him have a couple in the same place that Dwight had belted him. My punches were hurried and not so good, but Bronson was in no condition to handle them. He went down and stayed down while I salvaged the remaining pages of the diary.

Keever was staring into the bath, Dwight and Mary Ditson behind him.

"What have you here?"

"Ditson's murderer—and Sheila Brown's! It took me a hell of a long time to tumble, but I finally did when Dwight told about seeing Bronson heaving a big bundle of rubbish over Briarton Cliff. Then I realized the cliff's about as

Over My Dead Booty

high as a twelve-story window at the Maramoor. And the bundle was about as heavy as Ditson! That meant Bronson was practicing for throwing Ditson's dead body from the hotel window!

"He had to know something about the trajectory of his gruesome missile. Its target was to be Sheila parked in his convertible below!

"Ditson's murder was only incidental to Sheila's murder. Ditson had advertised by letters to the newspapers that he would commit suicide if his losses weren't paid back. Nobody, least of all the Maramoor Hotel people, took him seriously. If a suicide is on the level, he usually doesn't tell a soul, much less advertise it in the papers. Even Westfall must have thought he was bluffing, but he couldn't afford to call Ditson's hand.

"The set-up was perfect for Bronson. He merely had to get in a little practice heaving man-sized objects from twelve-story heights. My guess is that he had experimented with several bundles before Dwight happened along.

"No parking was permitted in front of the Maramoor and beneath Ditson's room. Bronson checked on Ditson's window, planted his convertible there with the top down and ran into the hotel. The Maramoor is a big hotel. The odds were against anyone noticing Bronson enter or leave. He had only to rap on Ditson's door, then rap Ditson and heave him out of the window with a mind to his Briarton Cliff ballistics. His human missile was well aimed.

"Of course his lovely victim could not dispute his subsequent statement that he had reached the curb on the opposite side of the street, waved, then seen Ditson's plunge.

"I was fooled because I couldn't find a motive for Bronson's killing Ditson. Not until I realized that Ditson was merely the projectile he aimed at Sheila did I think about a motive for killing her. The answer must be in her diary, which he never knew existed until tonight. My guess is that Bronson had converted securities she'd entrusted to him. The diary will probably tell how much his booty was."

"It does!" said Dwight. He had come into the bath and picked up several pages. "It tells to the dollar—ninety-five thousand of them!"

Bronson groaned back into consciousness. Whirling, Dwight kicked him. I got him the hell out of there and back into the room where Hinchman stood in custody of two of Keever's goons. Hinchman watched as Bronson was dragged out.

"Put us in the same cell, please," said Hinchman. "It'll raise my social standing."

It was so corny I remembered my promise to myself, that I'd hit Hinchman before I got out of Midtown. So I did.

THE END

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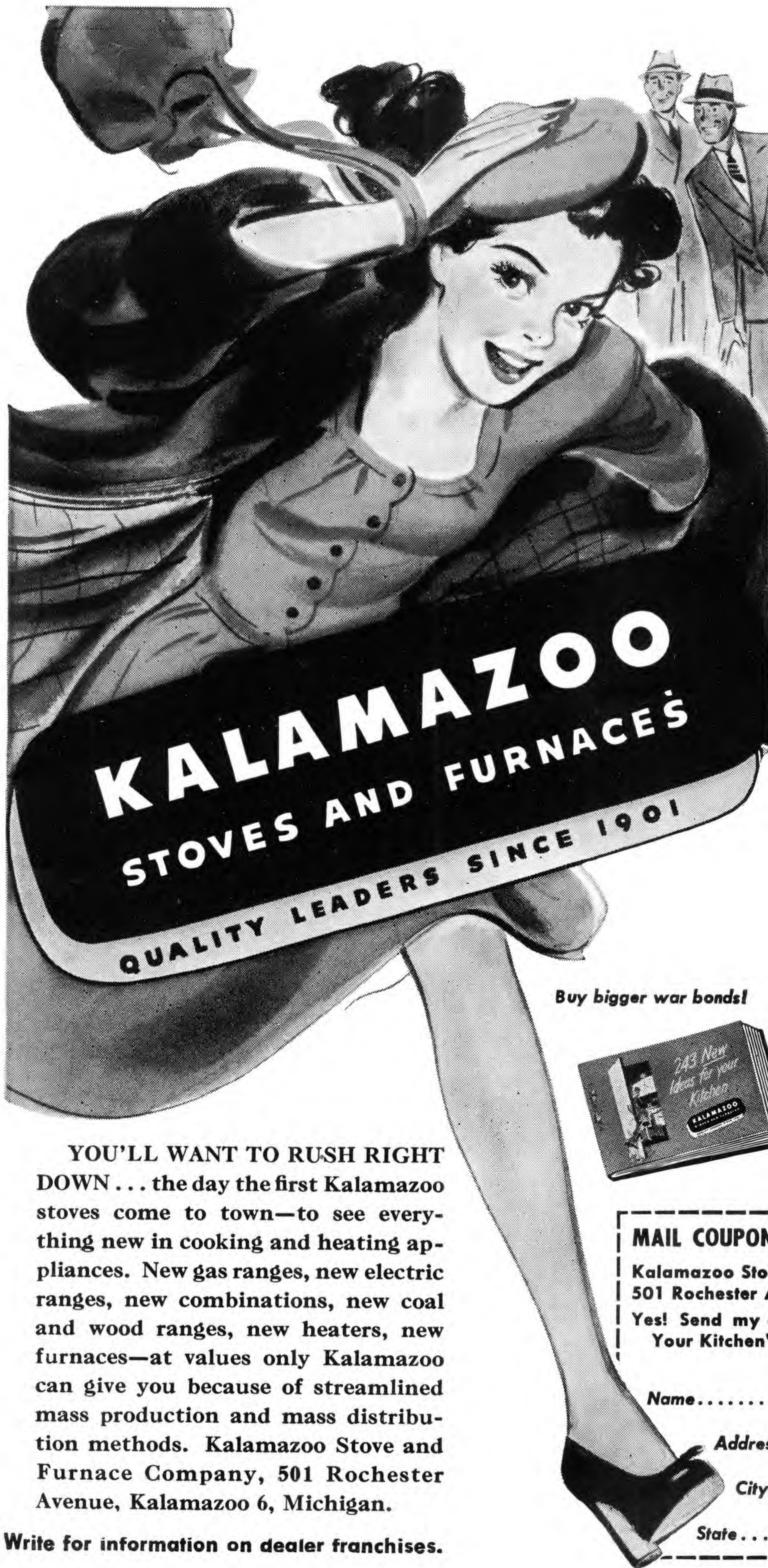
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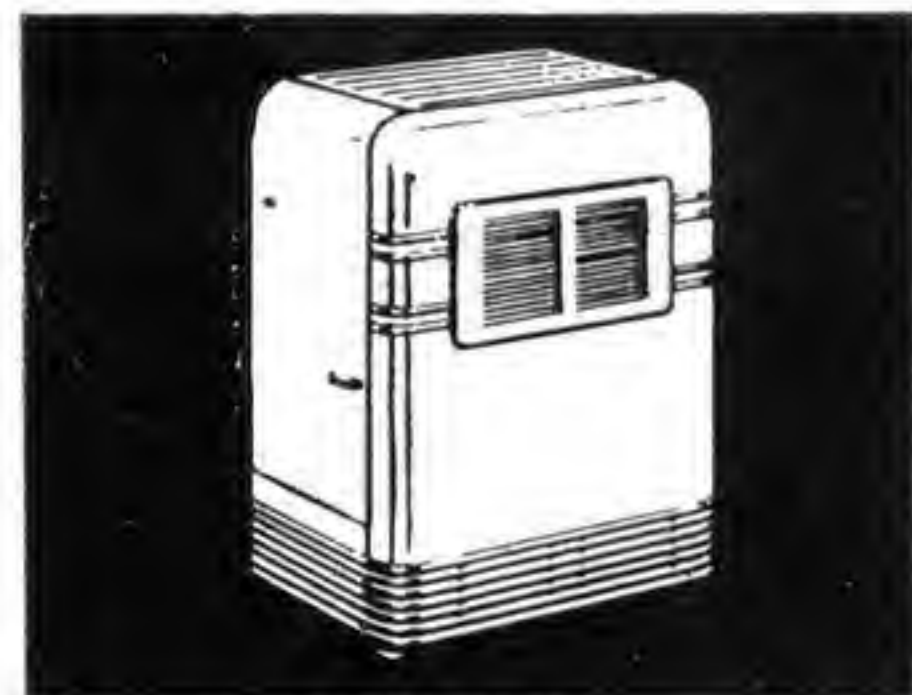
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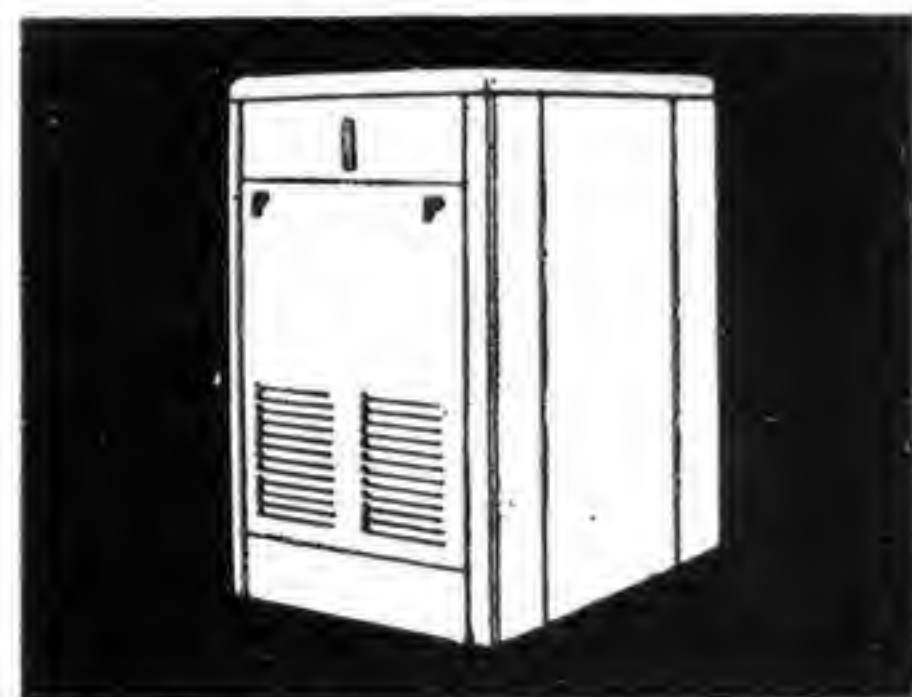
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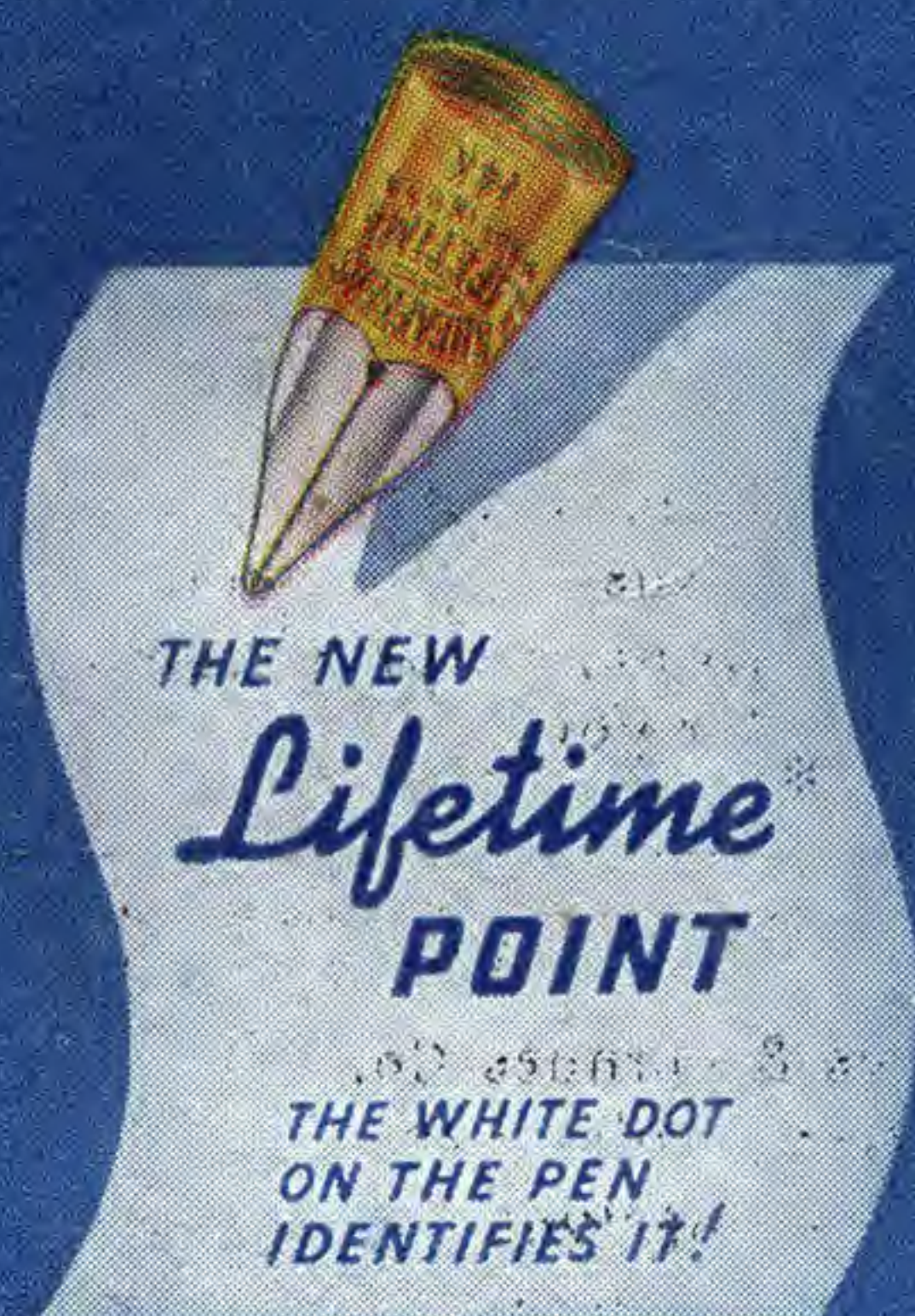
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